

LOVECRAFT STUDIES 21



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Infratextual Structures in Poe, Bierce, and Lovecraft

By Andrew Wheeler

"Ye dreamers, then,
Forgers of daring tales! we bless you then,
Imposters, drivellers, dotards, as the ape
Philosophy will call you."
-- William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1850, V:523-26.

The twentieth century has been a time of great and weighty movements in literary criticism. There have been a thousand critical theories brought forth, fragmenting literary theory until it seems that each author has at least one school of criticism unique to his work, and major authors several squabbling camps of critics. The result is a complete muddle of half-baked theories and completely baked theorists. There no longer is a consensus on anyone's work, making it seem as if "the basic lesson one can draw from the history of literary criticism is that it is difficult for criticism to be more significant than the works it criticizes".¹

But, perhaps, the problem is that schools of critics tend to rely on *a priori* assumptions, and those preformed opinions can only distort a text. If one reads poetry expecting prose, for a rather obvious example, one will necessarily view that text in an unfavorable way. A piece should obviously be judged for itself and by itself, with the critic finding the criteria for the success or failure of the work within the work itself and not by entering into the text with an predetermined overall theory of what literature should and should not be. Criticism, then, would simply be reading, refined and systematized. Still, the critic would not be limited to a single possible reading of a work, since

the role of the reader as incorporated in the novel must be seen as something potential and not actual. His reactions are not set out for him, but he is simply offered a frame of possible decisions, and when he has made his choice, then he will fill in the picture accordingly.²

The remainder of criticism is essentially a matter of description and taste: telling what one has found in each particular work and how successful one found it. All criticism must thus be grounded in the work; in the specific expectations, ideas, symbols, and so forth that the work itself, or the tradition the work places itself in, uses or raises. The critic must, first and foremost, determine what theoretical axes the work tends to construct itself along, or ask its reader to construct it along. A critic can, of course, overlay any theoretical axis he desires over a particular work, but if that axis is not embodied in the work, any resulting reading will tend to warp the text, and read into it things that the

¹Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 30.

²Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 55. My discussion will necessarily rely rather heavily on the concept of the implied reader as codified by Iser, although I will not draw much upon Iser's specific examples and uses of his system in his book.

author did not intend and which would never have been seen if the critic were not specifically hunting for them. It is an axiom that one tends to find what one is looking for, so entering into a text with a goal already in mind will merely show one that one can see nothing but one's goal.

Thus, each genre must construct the ideas and critical concepts that are to be used to elucidate it. And if one wishes to examine a specific genre, one must use its specific themes and terminology. "One can reject or accept the whole group of pure horror tales, but one must admit that within the limits of the *genre* there exists a certain hierarchy of lesser and greater as in any other art."³ That is, if one accepts drama in blank verse as a literary form (and it once was not considered one), Shakespeare must be considered at the top of the list of authors working in that form. Likewise, Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, and H. P. Lovecraft represent the pinnacle of the American horror tale, and "the time is past when mature critics can brush aside the work of Poe, Bierce, and Lovecraft from its place in American and world literature".⁴

So, let us examine horror fiction. The problem with much of the mainstream criticism of horror fiction has been that it has tried to take the critical theories of a different genre and overlay them on horror. This is the critical equivalent of looking for the rhyme scheme in a Dickens novel. Horror, generally speaking, is not concerned with human actions in and of themselves as much as mainstream fiction traditionally has been. To show the differences between these two radically different attitudes towards mankind, we can construct three metacategories of fiction-categories above those in general use in criticism, and of course comprising merely one of the many axes on which one can examine literature. First, there is human-centered fiction, premised on the idea that "humans, as they are now, are the focus of interest and that their problems and goal are somehow *important* . . . based on the premise that human endeavour of some sort is somehow meaningful".⁵ Secondly, there is fiction centered on human evolution, concerning an 'evolved' humanity, different not simply "in a merely social sense" from us, but qualitatively different. This category of fiction is generally concerned with the ultimate potentials of mankind, for good or ill. Then, most useful to our present discussion, there is cosmos-centered fiction, which "attempts to ease the reader away from his preconceived notions entirely and leave him with the awed feeling that he really knows nothing about the cosmos at all--but is *about to know*".⁶ This type of fiction takes its starting-point from Einsteinian physics and denies man's ultimate meaningfulness in the universe. The essential issue in cosmic fiction is that "common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large".⁷ A similar system, but with only two types, naturalistic and estranged, corresponding roughly to the human-centered and cosmos-centered categories of the Tierney system, has been proposed by Darko Suvin,⁸ but the Tierney tripartite system captures the additional idea of evolving humanity, and would be generally more useful to criticism for that reason. If horror stories fit anywhere in the typology of literary categories, it will be as cosmos-centered fiction. To function as such, they must generally create a literary illusion stronger than that necessary in most genres, as the fantastic and the horrible are that much more likely to be disbelieved than the ordinary and the usual.

Very often in horror stories, there is a strong sense of textuality in the story, with the ideas of narration, writing, and reading being given large sway in the text. Specifically, horror stories, as a genre, tend to have dramatized narrators, or narrators who are also characters in the story. As Todorov points out, this type of narrator

is quite suitable to the fantastic. He is preferable to the simple character, who can easily lie, as we shall see in several examples. But he is also preferable to the non-represented narrator, and this for two reasons. First, if

³Peter Penzoldt, "From *The Supernatural in Fiction*", in *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, ed. S. T. Joshi (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980), pp. 69-70.

⁴S. T. Joshi, "Lovecraft Criticism: A Study", in Joshi, p. 22.

⁵Richard L. Tierney, "Lovecraft and Cosmic Quality in Fiction", in Joshi, pp. 193-94. These three categories are, I believe, unique to Tierney, but should have wider sway because of their critical usefulness, especially in our present, postmodernist era.

⁶Ibid.

⁷H. P. Lovecraft, letter to Farnsworth Wright, 5 July 1927 (SL II.150).

⁸Suvin, p. 18.

a supernatural event were reported to us by such a narrator, we would immediately be in the marvelous; there would be no occasion to doubt his words. But the fantastic, as we know, requires doubt.⁹

The dramatized narrator can of course be simply telling the story, as if the reader were there present with him listening, and this device is found often in horror fiction. However, this device can also undergo a transformation, with the utilization of a character who is, within the context of the story, actually writing the texts that the reader is reading. These "self-conscious narrators, aware of themselves as writers"¹⁰ further add to the complexity of the text. The text can no longer be considered merely that of the actual writer, as it belongs equally to the infratextual writer. There is a further distinction within the category of infratextual narrators, in that the entire text may be presented as a document or there may be infratexts within the main text, writings of characters from the world about which the actual writer is writing.

A fairly simple example can be found in Bierce's story, "A Cold Greeting". The story opens with Bierce stating "this is a story told by the late Benson Foley of San Francisco".¹¹ From the first sentence, this story is already a metafiction. Bierce's story is not necessarily the same as that of Benson Foley; as it is his retelling or re-presenting of that story. The reader immediately sees that this tale has been passed on, and is thus seen at more of a distance. The reader is led to think of it as more likely to be true, as it is told by a person who does not appear in the story. It is someone else's tale. Bierce makes no claim for its veracity, but the fact that it has been narrated twice tends to make the reader accept it more. After all, the reader is expected to reason, Bierce accepted it himself, and is passing it on to the reader without comment.

Usually, infranarrators are major characters in the tales they tell, much like real-world storytellers. The purpose of telling a story from a character's point of view is to draw the implied reader more deeply into the story, to force that reader to believe the story. To disbelieve a story told by a sympathetic narrator, the reader would have to believe that narrator is a liar. These authors understand that, and often present their tales as unbelievable, to force that issue in the reader's mind. For instance, "A Descent into the Maelstrom", by Poe, has two unnamed narrators, one telling the story to the reader and an infranarrator telling the story to the first narrator. The infranarrator at the very end of the story tells the main narrator, "I now tell it [his story] to you--and you will put no more faith in it than did the merry fishermen of Lofoden".¹² The story end there without a resolution of the issue of belief as it pertains to the narrator, so then that issue of belief is then forced onto the reader. This, interestingly, leads directly to Tzvetan Todorov's definition of the fantastic, of a

text [which] must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described . . . this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work.¹³

The reader is given an event that he cannot fit into his everyday view of the world, that will not fit into science and nature as he understands them. He must either reject that event, as a lie or a dream, or he must realign his views of reality. This is all, of course, primarily applying to the implied reader encoded in the text. Most actual readers will know the difference between fiction and reality, but they will also face this issue of belief within the confines of the story. And a horror story, relying, as it typically does, on a grotesque and horrifying event, will generally require more

⁹Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 83. It would be useful to note here that the 'Fantastic', as Todorov describes it, is the merest sliver of a genre that truly existed only in France for less than a hundred years and in which only one or two works remain in the fantastic through the end of the story. Luckily, Todorov's analysis is useful for examining other species of weird fiction, as it touches on perhaps the most important point of such tales, the issue of the believability or reality of the textual world.

¹⁰Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 155.

¹¹Ambrose Bierce, "A Cold Greeting", *The Complete Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 192.

¹²Edgar Allan Poe, "A Descent into the Maelstrom", *The Unabridged Edgar Allan Poe* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1983), p. 698.

¹³Todorov, p. 33.

proof to overcome the reader's disbelief than a non-fantastic story, or even a story featuring a more benign aspect of the fantastic.

Lovecraft especially faces this problem, as his horrifying elements are not merely the standard Gothic trappings of disinterred corpses or ghosts, but alien races and creatures wholly unlike humanity. He therefore relies heavily on dramatized narrators who highlight their part in the story and thus force the issue of belief, disallowing the reader to easily doubt his tale.

For my contact with this affair has been closer than that of any other layman, and I have carried away impressions which are yet to drive me to drastic measures.

It was I who fled frantically out of Innsmouth in the early morning hours of July 16, 1927, and whose frightened appeals for government inquiry and action brought on the whole reported episode.¹⁴

Here the narrator constructs himself as the holder of privileged information. He makes the claim that he is the only one who can tell the 'whole story'. This tends to give the reader more confidence in him, as he should thus know more than anyone else, and if anyone is to believe concerning this event, it would be he. But that still assumes that the reader can believe this story at all, which is by no means necessarily true.

There is also the issue of a self-conscious narrator, writing a text and conscious of his writing of it. Lovecraft's narrators are commonly self-conscious, and, more than that, they commonly mention or call attention to the fact that they are, indeed, writing a text. "These pages . . . are written in the cabin of the ship that is bringing me home", "I can scarcely bear to write it down in black and white even now", "having written a full account", "I have merely set down certain things appealing to me as facts", "I immediately commenced to write this hurried chronicle"—all these sorts of claims for immediate relation of text to event are common in Lovecraft.¹⁵ Lovecraft's work often, because of these mechanisms, hearkens back to the immediacy of the epistolary novel of the eighteenth century. One can find an echo of *Pamela* or other such novels in the strangest places in Lovecraft, and for the same effects, such as "So here I am, squatting in the slime of the central room and making these notes on my record scroll by the light of the electric lamp."¹⁶

The reader then is forced to think of the text, not as the magazine in which he is reading the story (or the later book collection), but the actual document it purports to be, published therein and which is therefore literally true as it was written by the narrator who 'was there'. It would be a mistake to think of this as a literary reversion, of a writer who was simply redoing what had already been done two hundred years before. The self-conscious narrator is used in Lovecraft, and to a lesser extent also in Poe and Bierce, not to show the inner thoughts of a character, as was its primary role in the developing novel of the eighteenth century, but to add more convincing detail and depth to the story. As Lovecraft's writing career went on, the more baroque self-conscious stylings of his earlier work were gradually weeded out and were replaced by a

matured method of telling a horror story [which] was a natural consequence of the importance of the new universe of science in his writings, for it was the method of scientific realism, approaching in some of his last tales (*At the Mountains of Madness* and "The Shadow out of Time") the precision, objectivity, and attention to detail of a report in a scientific journal.¹⁷

This can be compared with Bierce's flat journalistic style, of which more below. Both styles aimed to create the same impression: that the narrator is a reputable and believable character in whom the reader should put his trust.

The flip side of the self-conscious narrator is a narrator who discovers a text, and that text is then presented within the larger text as an artifact of the fictional world. The narrator is no longer a text-creator, here he becomes

¹⁴Lovecraft, "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (DH 304).

¹⁵Lovecraft, "The Shadow out of Time" (DH 368-69); *At the Mountains of Madness* (MM 59); "Dagon" (D 19); "Beyond the Wall of Sleep" (D 35); "The Temple" (D 71-72).

¹⁶Lovecraft, "In the Walls of Eryx" (D 306).

¹⁷Leiber in Joshi, p. 55.

the text-discoverer. Instead of trying to convince the reader, as above, now he is unconvinced himself, but wavering in the Todorovian tension between disbelief and belief. The narrator's responses to these infratexts can give the reader a clue as to how and with what degree of credulity to read the entire text.

As I re-read the cramped handwriting I felt as never before that my credulous opponents might have more on their side than I had conceded. After all, there might be some queer and perhaps hereditarily misshapen outcasts in those shunned hills, even though no such race of star-born monsters as folklore claimed. And if there were, then the presence of strange bodies in the flooded streams would not be wholly beyond belief. Was it so presumptuous to suppose that both the old legends and the recent reports had this much of reality behind them? But even as I harboured these doubts I felt ashamed that so fantastic a piece of bizarre as Henry Akeley's wild letter had brought them up.¹⁸

The reader is not expected, in stories such as this, to believe immediately in the supernatural element, as the narrator himself does not believe it. "The Whisperer in Darkness" serves as a good example of the tension of belief in narrator and reader. The narrator reads newspaper reports of strange bodies found by local residents on remote upstate Vermont riverbanks after a major flood, bodies that disappear before anyone else can find them or take pictures of them. The narrator, a professor of literature at Lovecraft's fictional Miskatonic University named Albert Wilmarth, is naturally very skeptical of this account and proceeds to write letters berating the paper for running such an obvious hoax, and, in fact, spends most of the story in disbelief, if not actual disgust, of the claims of the supernatural put forth by his eventual correspondent, Henry Akeley, who represents the position of belief in the story just as Wilmarth represents disbelief.

There are many other instances, though, where infratexts are used in Lovecraft merely to bolster the argument for the supernatural occurrence, or to give his characters (and his readers) more information about those occurrences. There are, just to cite a few examples, "notes and data", "an ordinary notebook, about 5 X 3 inches in size, and containing thirty leaves", "the yellow scroll with the green script", and "the worn leather book".¹⁹ An especially interesting infratext appears in *At the Mountains of Madness*, when the narrator and his companion enter a strange city on the other side of a huge mountain range in Antarctica and find strange mosaics and carvings on the walls of that city.

Naturally, no one set of carvings which we encountered told more than a fraction of any connected story; nor did we even begin to come upon the various stages of that story in their proper order. Some of the vast rooms were independent units so far as their designs were concerned, whilst in other cases a continuous chronicle would be carried through a series of rooms and corridors. The best of the maps and diagrams were on the walls of a frightful abyss below even the ancient ground level—a cavern perhaps 200 feet square and sixty feet high, which had undoubtedly been an educational centre of some sort. There were many provoking repetitions of the same material in different rooms and buildings; since certain chapters of experience, and certain summaries or phases of racial history, had evidently been favourites with different decorators or dwellers. Sometimes, though, variant versions of the same theme proved useful in settling debatable points and filling in gaps. (MM 60-61)

This is an example of what I will call a megatext (as it is within the regular text, I could go one step further and call it a inframegatext, but, out of deference to my reader, I shall not). It is the history of a race as carved and embedded in their walls, as a part of their city. Interestingly, it serves a strictly informational purpose in the story, as the reader has already been convinced that this is, indeed, the city of the alien creatures. The megatext allows Lovecraft to explain the workings of their city, to tell their history and something of their culture, in a way which no other device would

¹⁸Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness" (DH 220).

¹⁹Lovecraft, "The Shunned House" (MM 239); "The Green Meadow" (HM 3-4); "The Mound" (HM 113); "Winged Death" (HM 243). For the purposes of the present, strictly textual, discussion, I will consider all of Lovecraft's "revisions" as part of the body of his work if the prose is obviously Lovecraft's, as is true in the so-called 'primary revisions'.

allow. It has the effect of soaking the reader, through the narrator, in these creatures' culture, making them less alien to him, less unknown, and thus more human. This is an important feature of this story's structure, which I will examine in more detail below. The megatext serves to remove some of the distance between the aliens and the reader, especially with the parallels between the aliens' civilization and the Roman Empire. The reader can no longer think of them as nameless horrors, but is forced to see them as another intelligent race, much like mankind in many ways. The reader then begins to transfer the story of the decline and death of these creatures onto mankind, and perhaps to think of the eventual and inevitable end of his own race. This is a strong example of the essential purpose of horror fiction at work, the cognitive estrangement of reader from his accepted views of the world and from the concept of a human-centered universe.

Another use of infratexts is to efface the author and give the story over completely to a character who could not tell the story otherwise. In this case, the infratext becomes the bulk of the story and the case is close to that of a self-conscious narrator telling his own story. But the difference is that, in a story with a large infratext, the author is starting the story in his own voice and then deliberately stepping back and letting one of the characters tell the story in his own voice. For instance, "Winged Death" begins quickly by setting the scene of a man dead in a hotel room, and the coroner's inquest finding his diary at the scene. The story then switches to that diary, but not to the exact words of that diary. Lovecraft is careful to say "here, in essence, is the text which the doctor read aloud" (HM 243). But there is left in the reader's mind a question of how much 'in essence' implies the author's reworking of that diary. At the end of this same story, after reading in the diary how the writer thought his mind would be put into the body of a fly upon his death, the coroner's party looks up at the ceiling and sees

on the smooth white ceiling . . . a series of shaky, straggling ink-tracks, such as might have been made by the crawlings of some ink-drenched insect . . . beyond a doubt these inky smudges formed definite letters of the alphabet--letters coherently arranged in English words. (HM 263)

This creates a particularly complex infratext. The very existence of the text proves the truth of the story told in the diary, but the text of the message on the ceiling is that the investigators should read the diary to get the true story. The two infratexts reinforce each other and add legitimacy to the claims made within the diary. The diary by itself would not convince anyone, but, together with the fly-tracks, the reader is convinced. Lovecraft keeps back the fly-track message until the very end of the story, maintaining the Todorovian tension until the last moment.

A similar infratextual mechanism is the author's use of statements in his own voice to influence the reading of the text. These statements can either be clumsy, and thus tend to detract from the fictional illusion, or, when effective, will make the situation stand out in even higher relief to the reader's normal life and expectations. The author obviously strives for the latter, but the effect is not necessarily so easily attained. One example of a successful use of authorial statements is in Bierce's story "A Tough Tussle". The narrator breaks from a simple omniscient narration of the action to speak directly to the reader.

I repeat that Lieutenant Byring was a brave and intelligent man. But what would you have? Shall a man cope, single-handed, with so monstrous an alliance as that of night and solitude and silence and the dead, --while an incalculable host of his own ancestors shriek into the ear of his spirit their coward counsel, sing their doleful death-songs in his heart, and disarm his very blood of all his iron? The odds are too great--courage was not made for so rough use as that.²⁰

Bierce often speaks directly to the reader, and usually to make points such as this. His terse style (of which more below) does not allow much atmospheric detail, which Poe and Lovecraft rely on heavily to create mood. Bierce counters this by his use of direct authorial statements, which tend to work because of their very terseness and similarity in style to newspaper accounts, which readers are used to taking as true. Bierce's no-nonsense laying down of the facts, with its general absence of rhetorical flourishes, also tends to make his accounts seem more authoritative. Such a style constructs its reader as a receiver of facts who is not expected to doubt those facts.

²⁰Bierce, "A Tough Tussle", *Complete Stories*, p. 303.

A similar mechanism occurs when a writer takes over a tale from his characters. This can also have an ambiguous result. Bierce uses this device frequently, and especially in his story, "The Eyes of the Panther". The story begins as a normal third-person narrated story, but when Irene Marlowe says she will tell Jenner Brading the story of her parents, Bierce interrupts by stating that 'in deference to the reader's possible prejudice against the artless method of an unpractised historian the author ventures to substitute his own version for hers'.²¹ Then, at the end of the infrastory, Bierce moves back out to the previous scene of Irene and Jenner by saying 'this is what occurred during a night in a forest, but not all of it did Irene Marlowe relate to Jenner Brading; not all of it was known to her'.²² The result of all this upon Bierce's implied reader is both mixed and ambiguous. The more 'practised' history is certainly more complete, and possibly more liable to convince the reader of its reality, than Irene's necessarily more sketchy and incomplete narration would have been, but Bierce, in introducing his shift of story-telling mechanism, deliberately plays up the fact that it is a story he is telling. The reader is forced to confront the fact that this is a story, a fictional work, and cannot simply slip easily into the narrative illusion, as he would have been able if Bierce had merely told the infrastory from an omniscient third-person point of view, but had not drawn attention to his methods of narration. Bierce also tells the reader that he is telling more of the story than Irene could, thereby implying that Irene is a real person and strengthening the narrative illusion. The reader is left split: knowing the story is a story and being specifically reminded of its fictional nature, he nevertheless is also being constructed to view the story as a truthful text. The reader is left confused as to what his reaction should be, and such a reaction may carry over to his reading of other works (to speak, momentarily, of a possible 'real-world' reader) or inform that reader's new perception of the world as a place where more than one side of a proposition can be true. The latter, of course, feeds into horror's construction of reality as not capable of being bounded by human laws, in this case laws of logic.

Lovecraft also uses a similar mechanism in "The Horror in the Burying-Ground", by narrating the story in his own voice but, parenthetically, telling the reader who, in the village in which the story is set, would be narrating the tale, and at which points one narrator falls silent and another begins, to create the illusion that the reader is present in body in this village, and is hearing the tale from these various narrators. This device, rather than creating the snowballing contradictions in Bierce, serves mainly as an element of 'local color' to add to the verisimilitude of the work. "Up to this point the story is usually told by Ezra Davenport, or Luther Fry, if Ezra is laid up with chilblains, as he is apt to be in winter; but from here on old Calvin Wheeler takes up the thread" (HM 292). Lovecraft does not use this device simultaneously to undercut and to build up the story, as Bierce did, but in a simpler manner, simply to add to the illusion of the story.

A writer may also introduce a story specifically as a text, or use an infranarrator to tell a secondary story within the confines of the overall tale. This is a quite common device, often a component of or found in conjunction with other devices. It puts the story in the hands of a character, which both increases believability by identifying the reader with the first-person witness narrator, and distances the careful reader, who realizes that the narrating character could be lying and is often specifically portrayed as unreliable. This is another aspect of the way a writer, especially in the case of Bierce, will simultaneously distance and include the reader. Instead of taking a story out of his characters' hands, as we saw above, with this device he is specifically putting the story into a character's hands, stepping back himself from the story, and calling attention to what he is doing. Bierce, in "The Spook House", narrates the first half of the story from a detached point of view, but switches when he decides 'the rest of this adventure can as well be related in his own words, from the Frankfort *Advocate* of August 6, 1876'.²³ Commentators have noted Bierce's use of such shifts, but have concentrated on the effect of such shifts to

distance the action by switching from the immediacy of interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness technique to omniscient, impersonal third-person narrative. The reader, already involved empathically with the protagonist, is thereby required to be also divorced from that identification in order to assess the flaws and the limitations of the protagonist.²⁴

²¹Bierce, "The Eyes of the Panther", *Complete Stories*, p. 39.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 42.

²³Bierce, "The Spook House", *Complete Stories*, p. 158.

²⁴Cathy N. Davidson, *The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 22.

But the effect, even when the shift is from a more immediate mode of narration to an impersonal third-person mode, is not necessarily or entirely that of distancing or divorcing the reader from the character. And, certainly, when the shift is from impersonal to immediate, the effect is not instantly to identify the implied reader completely with the narrator. The result in both cases is more mixed and ambivalent. The reader becomes conscious of the art and artifice of the telling of the story, and can no longer engage in that story as he could before. But these devices also serve to make that story more believable and (in the sections narrated in the first person) closer to the character's own feelings and perceptions of the scene. The reader can identify with the character, but is not allowed to let that identification overwhelm his powers of judgment. He is neither completely engaged nor completely disengaged from the action; rather, he is imperfectly or incompletely engaged in it.

Lovecraft and Poe also use infranarrators, but, as before, not for the same ends. Infranarrators in Poe and Lovecraft tend to be used simply to tell a story that the author does not want his narrator to be a witness to, or was not a witness to because of the action of the story. A typical example would be Poe's "The Gold-Bug", in which the infranarrator, William Legrand, explains how he figured out the puzzle to find the treasure after the unnamed main narrator was confused by his wanderings and weird instructions, and also after the reader knows the treasure has been found. Of course, "The Gold-Bug" is in no way a horror story, but the same device recurs in Poe's other work.

Lovecraft uses infranarrators for similar reasons, generally because he tends to give an extensive background story, stretching far into the past and of which both the narrator and the implied reader, situated in the present day, are initially unaware of. In stories such as "The Colour out of Space" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth" the narrator searches out old men who tell him the beginning of the story, from the time that they were boys. This gives a historical reference and frame to the tales, and gives the horror an added dimension: that of time. Time, and especially the immensities of geological time, are very important images in Lovecraft. "His interest eventually centered on the continuities of the historical time-stream, the appalling yet thrilling awesomeness (a basic dichotomy in Lovecraft's thought) of space and time, and the minute place of humanity in them."²⁵ By pushing horrors back through time to the ultimate extension of a human narrator's life (the infranarrators of "The Colour out of Space" and "The Shadow over Innsmouth" are each around one hundred years old), those creatures are given an existence not only separate from mankind, but generally longer and stronger than man's. In many other tales, the creatures inhabited the earth before mankind and then died out, or perhaps still exist, but those tales do not fall within this present discussion. There is also the case of the author mentioning that infrastory-telling is going on within the story, as in "The White Ship", where the narrator, speaking of the titular ship, tells us that "at first it told me only the plain little tales of calm beaches and near ports, but with the years it grew more friendly and spoke of other things; of things more strange and more distant in space and time" (D 37). The author is no longer the only story-teller now; as in most of these devices, he has other characters within the story telling stories of their own. Only, in this example, those infrastories are not given to the reader. It is merely mentioned that stories are told, and a slight description is given of what the stories were about. Thus, the only important thing, the only thing the reader has to know, is that stories were told, and, in "The White Ship", those stories encouraged the narrator to board the ship and sail with it, himself, to see these other lands. The narrator believed the stories he was told, and they turned out to be true; now the issue is forced onto the implied reader, the issue of whether he will believe the tale told to him or not.

This issue of story-telling leads directly into the related issue of writers, especially of weird fiction, as characters within the stories. This can further obscure, or add more dimensions to, the issue of believability. Are the infratextual writers to be seen as explaining or putting forth the ideas of the actual author, or as straw men for the author to knock down, or something else? Perhaps the perfect example of this tension can be found in Bierce's story, "The Suitable Surroundings", in which the writer Colston comes upon his friend Marsh reading one of Colston's stories on a streetcar and asks him if Marsh, as a reader, has

no duties corresponding to his privileges? You have paid five cents for that newspaper. It is yours. You have the right to read it when and where you will. Much of what is in it is neither helped nor harmed by time and place and mood; some of it actually requires to be read at once--while it is fizzing. But my story is not of that

²⁵Kenneth W. Faig, Jr. and S. T. Joshi, "H. P. Lovecraft: His Life and Work", in Joshi, p. 3.

character. It is not 'the very latest advices' from Ghostland. You are not expected to keep yourself *au courant* with what is going on in the realm of spooks. The stuff will keep until you have leisure to put yourself into the frame of mind appropriate to the sentiment of the piece--which I respectfully submit that you cannot do in a street car, even if you are the only passenger. The solitude is not of the right sort. An author has rights which the reader is bound to respect.²⁶

The reader, going along with the story as he usually is, is brought up short by this sudden demand. On the one hand, it makes sense that certain moods cannot be created under unfavorable circumstances and, if one takes the ultimate end of horror fiction to be the creation of a certain mood or a specific emotion, the claim does seem to have a certain validity. Swinging to the other extreme, there is Davidson's assertion that

Colston's assertions about the conventions of his art [are] an overstatement of what the writer tries to do and a *reductio ad absurdum* of how he tries to do it. It is a contradiction that cancels out literature. To take the argument seriously for a moment (an honor it does not deserve), if one were required to read, say, "The Open Boat" by Stephen Crane only in an open boat on an empty sea, one would certainly better understand all that Crane portrayed, and, by the same token, one would not at all need Crane to understand it. Colston's image of fiction turns the traditional mirror into a transparent glass on which is etched the outline of what should, could, or might be seen if the glass were not there.²⁷

But that is not necessarily what Colston is saying. Colston is not saying that a ghost story *must* be read in an empty house at midnight, but that an empty house is a more 'suitable' surrounding for the reading of a ghost story than a crowded streetcar. Surely Davidson would agree that one is hard put to focus one's attention on any reading, be it 'The Suitable Surroundings' or *Ulysses* or the latest Harlequin romance, in a crowded, noisy streetcar. Colston's point, of course, goes beyond that, since he says that even if the streetcar were empty, it would not be 'suitable'. It seems what Davidson is reacting to so strongly, and on which point most critics would probably side with her, is the implied 'intentional fallacy'²⁸ of Colston's assertion that the 'author has rights which the reader is bound to respect'. Criticism has denied the author any rights or any privileged position *vis-à-vis* his text for several decades now, and the thought has become somewhat alien to criticism. But Bierce wrote before that critical fashion came into being (though he would certainly have detested it as he detested all critical fashions). Nevertheless, Colston's self-aggrandizing assertions cannot be simply taken as those of Bierce, partly because no assertion of the sort ever appeared in Bierce's own voluminous critical work, and partly because of the somewhat absurd air of Colston's assertion, to which Davidson correctly draws attention. Ultimately, the reader simply cannot accept Colston's assertions on their face. They are too broad, too alien to any known readerly or critical tradition. But perhaps Bierce is trying to imply that the reader is as important to fiction as the author is, that a fiction is not merely an artifact, but a dialogue, and as an indication of such a position Colston's theory of reading has some validity.

Bierce also plays with a writer's perceptions of an event in "The Damned Thing", but here the issue is not the relationship with the reader, but the relationship with the event.

"It was not written as news, for it is incredible, but as fiction. It may go as a part of my testimony under oath."

"But you say it is incredible."

"That is nothing to you, sir, if I also swear that it is true."²⁹

The writer embodies a tension between believability and truth found in all horror fiction, giving his truthful story to the newspapers as a fiction, then giving that fiction to the inquest as factual evidence. The story is thus both truthful

²⁶Bierce, "The Suitable Surroundings", *Complete Stories*, p. 223.

²⁷Davidson, p. 102.

²⁸Term coined by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their essay of the same name in 1946, and a major literary bugbear ever since.

²⁹Bierce, "The Damned Thing", *Complete Stories*, p. 99.

and fictional, believable as fiction but incredible as reality. These convolutions of fiction and reality act to tie the real world of the reader even closer to the fictional world, as the reader can see how an incredible story in his own world might have to be presented as fictional to be believed at all. This convolution also embodies one of Bierce's central tenets, that

Nothing is so improbable as what is true. It is the unexpected that occurs; but that is not saying enough; it is also the unlikely--one might almost say the impossible . . . Considered from a view-point a little anterior in time, it was almost infinitely unlikely that any event which has occurred would occur--any event worth telling in a story.³⁰

The tension is thus between the true and the believable, as not all that is true is to be admitted into the category of what is believable. Poe also understood this division, as he makes clear in 'The Premature Burial'.

There are certain scenes of which the interest is all-absorbing, but which are too entirely horrible for the purposes of legitimate fiction. These the mere romanticist must eschew, if he do not wish to offend, or to disgust. They are with propriety handled, only when the severity and majesty of truth sanctify and sustain them.³¹

Horror fiction deals essentially with the untrue, the impossible, and the horrible, but it must also make them believable, to attempt to impart to the horrifying occurrences what Poe calls 'the severity and majesty of truth'. This is the heart of the horror writer's dilemma: to tell a terrible story of estrangement from the norm, but to have it accepted as if it were true, a reception that every other sort of writer takes for granted.

This is where the idea of 'artistry' enters, where the consciousness of the writer of his own art, and of art in general becomes important. One can often see the writer's conception of his role as a writer, especially as a writer of weird fiction, embodied in the text. This is related very closely to the previous discussion, and to the whole nexus of believability. For example, there are stories tangentially or more strongly about the creation of art, such as Lovecraft's 'Pickman's Model'. In this story, the first-person narrator Thurber explains directly to his non-dramatized auditor³² how

only a real artist knows the actual anatomy of the terrible or the physiology of fear--the exact sort of lines and proportions that connect up with latent instincts or hereditary memories of fright, and the proper colour contrasts and lighting effects to stir the dormant sense of strangeness. (DH 13)

Lovecraft is not, of course, claiming such a skill for himself directly, as the narrator is speaking of the titular character, Richard Upton Pickman, a painter of grotesque and evil tableaux. But, in much the same manner as with Bierce's 'The Suitable Surroundings' (but neither as immediately nor as ambiguously), those aspects of Pickman's art are also transferred onto Lovecraft as a horror writer. The interesting thing is that Lovecraft's idea of the 'lines of fear' correspond in a rough way with the Freudian category of the uncanny, 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar'.³³ Lovecraft is admitting that there are things, whether in personal or racial memory as you will, that are essentially frightening either by their nature or by the previous experiences that they echo, and that a horror writer may use them to create those effects in his fiction. His creatures may be alien and unknown, but they incorporate common human ideas of what is horrifying, as all horror fiction must. The unknown

³⁰Bierce, 'The Short Story', *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*, vol. 10: *The Opinionator* (Washington, DC: Neale Publishing Company, 1911), pp. 246-47.

³¹Poe, 'The Premature Burial', p. 972.

³²Called 'Eliot' in the first line, but who is no more than the implied reader, coded rather more heavily than usual in the text.

³³Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 13: *The "Uncanny"* (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), p. 220.

cannot be purely new and completely unlike what has gone before, since a man cannot comprehend or imagine something that is completely alien to his experience.

Lovecraft approaches more closely to presenting a manifesto of his literary ideas in his story "The Silver Key", wherein the main character loses his ability to dream (in the most prosaic possible sense of that phrase), and thus loses his rudder in the world. He spends some time alone and sorrowful,

then he began once more the writing of books, which he had left off when dreams first failed him. But here, too, was there no satisfaction or fulfilment; for the touch of earth was upon his mind, and he could not think of lowly things as he could of yore. Ironic humour dragged down all the twilight minarets he reared, and the earthy fear of improbability blasted all the delicate and amazing flowers in his faery gardens. The convention of assumed pity spilt mawkishness on his characters, while the myth of an important reality and significant human events and emotions debased all his high fantasy into thinly veiled allegory and cheap social satire. His new novels were successful as his old ones had never been; and because he knew how empty they must be to please an empty herd, he burned them and ceased his writing. They were very graceful novels, in which he urbanely laughed at the dreams he lightly sketched; but he saw that their sophistication had sapped all their life away. (MM 412)

"The myth of an important reality and significant human events and emotions" is a more than adequate way of describing everything that Lovecraft and his fiction was striving against; the traditional conception of a human-centered universe and fiction which Lovecraft could not believe in. Lovecraft here all but tells the reader his general purposes, and thus provides the implied reader with the criteria for reading a Lovecraft story.

Lovecraft knew how much his sort of fiction, and his stories in particular, were looked down upon by the literary establishment of his day, and satirized their ideas about literature, as well as their views on his stories, in "The Unnamable". The 'literary' author, Joel Manton, tells the narrator, Carter,³⁴ that

my constant talk about "unnamable" and "unmentionable" things was a very puerile device, quite in keeping with my lowly standing as an author. I was too fond of ending my stories with sights or sounds which paralysed my heroes' faculties and left them without courage, words, or associations to tell what they had experienced . . . It was his view that only our normal, objective experiences possess any aesthetic significance, and that it is the province of the artist not to much to rouse strong emotion in action, ecstasy, and astonishment, as to maintain a placid interest and appreciation by accurate, detailed transcripts of every-day affairs. Especially did he object to my preoccupation with the mystical and the unexplained; for although believing in the supernatural much more fully than I, he would not admit that it is sufficiently commonplace for literary treatment. (D 200-201)

This is Lovecraft's parody of the realism of Theodore Dreiser (whom, coincidentally, Bierce also detested and wrote many criticisms of that strain of realism), a literary movement he cared for not at all. But it can also be seen in the light of Lovecraft's position that

occult believers are probably less effective than materialists in delineating the spectral and the fantastic, since to them the phantom world is so commonplace a reality that they tend to refer to it with less awe, remoteness, and impressiveness than do those who see in it an absolute and stupendous violation of the natural order.³⁵

Lovecraft is reversing his own position to make his character look even more foolish, to make him a man who believes in the occult but won't write about it because he doesn't think it is ordinary enough.

³⁴Who, it should be noted, very often stands in for Lovecraft himself in Lovecraft's fictions. The Randolph Carter character is, as pointed out by many critics, very similar to his author and stories featuring him often take on somewhat of an autobiographical tone.

³⁵Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (D 417).

Lovecraft also displays a great consciousness of working in a genre, with stylized conventions which have solidified into ungainly laws that hamper the effective telling of a particular story. Lovecraft's stories utilize standard horror conventions very infrequently, and even when something like a convention is used, there is a disclaimer attached to show that both the narrator and Lovecraft know the tradition and that both are trying to distance themselves from it. A particularly strong example occurs in "The Rats in the Walls", where the narrator notes

my old black cat, whose moods I know so well, was undoubtedly alert and anxious to an extent wholly out of keeping with his natural character. He roved from room to room, restless and disturbed, and sniffed constantly about the walls which formed part of the old Gothic structure. I realize how trite this sounds--like the inevitable dog in the ghost story, which always growls before his master sees the sheeted figure--yet I cannot consistently suppress it. (DH 33)

The point gains in strength specifically because the narrator is self-conscious of his sounding standardized and trite. Without a conscious flag to show that the narrator knows this device or idea has been used before, the reader will merely groan and say, "Oh, no, not another cat that's smarter than these fools!" The narrator is constructed as a person who has read some of the same books as his implied reader, and that tends to solidify the connection between their two worlds, the fictional and the implied real.

Moving from manifestations of specific textuality in the literary work, another major device is the interrelation of several or many tales to create a coherent, cohesive fictional world. There is little or no overall background to the tales in Poe, but there are the first glimmerings of an overall world-view in Bierce, especially in his use of the fictional writings of his created author 'Hall' and the created occult book, "Denneker's *Meditations*". Interconnections are, of course, used heavily by Lovecraft, who basically created an alternate geography of New England in which to place his stories. These connections can be, to a certain degree, distancing, as the astute reader will notice that these references are not to the real world, but to specifically fictional things in the depicted world and to other stories.

The largest aspect of these interconnections is the use of a common background of characters and occult knowledge, within the same world. Lovecraft used this device often, creating

New England cities such as Arkham and Innsmouth, institutions such as Miskatonic University in Arkham, semi-secret and mysterious cults, and a growing library of "forbidden" books, such as the *Necronomicon*, containing monstrous secrets about the present, future, and past of earth and the universe.

Any writer, even a thoroughgoing realist, may invent the names of persons and places, either to avoid libel or because his creations are hybrid ones, the qualities of many persons or places. Some of Lovecraft's inventions are of a more serious sort altogether, definitely distorting the "real" world that forms the background for many of his later supernatural tales. . . . the scholars and scientists who people Lovecraft's stories . . . [are] sober and staid realists, they yet know that they live on the brink of a horrid and ravening abyss unsuspected by ordinary folk. This knowledge does not come to them solely as the result of the weird experiences in which the stories involve them, but is part of their intellectual background.³⁶

Lovecraft's narrators embody the fictionality of his created world, in that they live and work in his fictional cities, they read in his horrifying fictional books, and they confront his fictional creatures with their lives and sanity at stake. The implied reader encounters the narrators before he comes across the horrors, and the narrators thus serve to immerse him in this new world, which is much like his usual accepted 'real' one but has the ultimate non-significance of nature much more strongly hinted at. Thus, before he has to face the shaking of his central ideas and principles in the body of the creatures of the story, he receives a diluted admixture of his world and the fictional one, in the person of the narrator.

Another, simpler type of interconnection is the use of characters from one story again in another story. Richard Pickman, of "Pickman's Model", appears again, transformed into a ghoul, in *The Dream-Quest of*

³⁶Leiber in Joshi, p. 58.

Unknown Kadath, and Randolph Carter, whom many commentators have claimed is Lovecraft's fictional alter ego, appears in several stories and is mentioned in passing in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. This gives the (actual) reader who has read another story with the same character an edge, in that he knows who the character is and something of his past. Pickman is the focus for the weird element in the first story; his appearance in the second appears to be purely as an 'extra' for Lovecraft's faithful readers, as his subsequent history is told in general terms in *Dream-Quest*.

Randolph Carter's history is somewhat more sketchy than Pickman's. He is the narrator of "The Unnamable", and he appears, not surprisingly, in "The Statement of Randolph Carter", and those two stories are somewhat similar, although the former is rather more light-hearted, remembering of course that 'light-hearted' is always a relative term in Lovecraft. He is the narrator of *Dream-Quest*, Lovecraft's longest 'Dreamlands' story. And then there are "The Silver Key" and "Through the Gates of the Silver Key", two stories that really tell one single connected tale, as the second explains and amplifies what actually happened at the end of the first. The Carter of these stories may be the Carter of the other three, although he need not be; the 'silver key' stories are more philosophical fantastic stories that do not rely on horrific events or creatures. The effect of particularly engaging the reader who has read the previous story or stories does not rely on any sort of encoding of the implied reader, since these stories (though in the case of *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and "Through the Gates of the Silver Key" the previous story is summarized) give the reader no knowledge that the events summarized were also narrated more fully in a separate story.

A somewhat related point concerns Lovecraft's references to Poe in his stories. In Lovecraft's fictional world, Poe was an actual fiction writer who is read and enjoyed by the characters of the stories. But, in addition, Lovecraft hints, Poe may have known an actual occult secret which he hinted at in his novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. The narrator of *At the Mountains of Madness* mentions that he was specifically interested in the antarctic expedition he was involved with in that story "because of the antarctical scene of Poe's only long story--the disturbing and enigmatical *Arthur Gordon Pym*" (MM 8). But, later, it is hinted that Poe's story may be more than a story, which also acts to allow the narrator to hint that his own story is more than just a story.

The new sound, as I have intimated, upset much we had decided; because it was what poor Lake's dissection had led us to attribute to those we had just judged dead. It was, Danforth later told me, precisely what he had caught in infinitely muffled form . . . certainly had a shocking resemblance to the wind-pipings we had both heard in the lofty mountain caves. At the risk of sounding querelle I will add another thing, too; if only because of the surprising way Danforth's impression chimed with mine. Of course common reading is what prepared us both to make the interpretation, though Danforth has hinted at queer notions about unsuspected and forbidden sources to which Poe may have had access when writing his *Arthur Gordon Pym* a century ago. It will be remembered that in that fantastic tale there is a word of unknown but terrible and prodigious significance connected with the antarctic and screamed eternally by the gigantic, spectrally snowy birds of that malign region's core. "*Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!*" That, I may admit, is exactly what we thought we heard. (MM 97)

The narrator here justifies the sound several different ways, by noting its similarity to the piping of the wind through the mountains, to hinting that it is the sound that would be expected from the creatures they had dug up from under the permafrost, before writing down the sound, before finally admitting that the sound is to be found in Poe. This tying together of the two authors' work tends to strengthen Poe's account, of course, as the more recent narrative adds a level of validation and proof to the earlier story, but it also strengthens Lovecraft's story, by giving it a history and a background it would otherwise lack. It thus provides much the same result as linking the story to an earlier work of Lovecraft's would have had: a strengthening of the believability of the narrated events through a created history and fictitious references to a fictitious world.

Both Bierce and Lovecraft make use of another very specific form of fictitious background, that of created occult texts. This allows the writer to provide information on the goings-on of the story in a infratext not written by any character in the story, but, instead, by a fictitious authority in the occult field. Bierce, as mentioned above, makes use of one fictitious author, 'Hali', and introduces two of his stories, 'An Inhabitant of Carcosa' and 'The Death of

Halpin Frayser", with invented quotations from Hali. The quotes explain what happens in the story, but in a roundabout and pseudo-mystical way, so that the reader cannot determine beforehand what is going to happen, but only is allowed to make the connection between quotation and story once the story is complete. Bierce also uses another fictitious occult book, "Dennecker's Meditations", once, in "A Psychological Shipwreck", again to explain the action. Here, Janette Harford is reading Dennecker's book, and when asked by her companion, Jarette, what she is reading, quotes the following passage:

To sundry it is given to be drawn away, and to be apart from the body for a season; for, as concerning rills which would flow across each other the weaker is borne along by the stronger, so there be certain of kin whose paths intersecting, their souls so bear company, the while their bodies go fore-appointed ways, unknowing.³⁷

Jarette, who narrates the story, later learns that he was never on the ship he thought he was, that Janette died when that other ship went down, and that she was a long-lost relative of his. The passage she quoted was therefore directly and precisely relevant to his situation. When a character is allowed to quote an infratext of such immediate application to the present situation when she would, in the reader's knowledge, have no reason to read that specific infratext, the reader must consider the author's intentions. The reader is forced to believe that either she has some inkling of what is going on, of which the reader is given no hint, or it was merely fantastically lucky and somewhat ironic that she read the passage she did. Nothing is given in the story to privilege either reading. The reader is simply left wondering. This is very similar to the Todorovian tension of the fantastic, especially if one sees the woman's possible knowledge of Jarette's relationship to her or of the bizarre nature of his non-physical presence on the ship as a normal explanation for the seemingly perfect fit of text and event. The 'fantastic luck' option then is the equivalent of the wondrous, the impossible, the bizarre. The implied reader is not specifically programmed one way or the other, but the real reader will most certainly choose one of the two solutions, entering either the wondrous or the uncanny in Todorovian terms.

Lovecraft also uses the device of created occult texts, but he uses more texts and uses them more frequently. The primary volume of this Lovecraftian reading library of the occult is the *Necronomicon*, in its various translations. Lovecraft's heroes tend to read and own the same books or at least to have access to Miskatonic University's library. Lovecraft even lists the universities and other collections known to have copies of the *Necronomicon* in their libraries, and, although his fictional Miskatonic University has one copy and is usually the center of scholarly activity in his stories, the other copies are claimed to be in real libraries such as Widener Library at Harvard University. The idea of a fictional book in a real library undoubtedly has a certain charm to scholars and bibliophiles, but it also adds much depth and verisimilitude to the story. If the *Necronomicon* were only available at Miskatonic, the reader would note that the fictional book can, of course, only be found at a fictional university. As it is, Miskatonic is only one of the universities mentioned, and so slips in as one of the list. The reader accepts it as a real university, just as he accepts Harvard or Brown as real universities within the story.

Each writer also has a specific style of narration, which is used to forward the weird effect. Bierce's is the most interesting and the most removed from the general Gothic/horror tradition. He uses a flat, unadorned style, tersely and concisely narrating the events. His stories are typically very short, a few thousand words at the most. The resulting style thus resembles a newspaper account: all meat and bone, with no fancy accoutrements or narrative flourishes. His effects thus rely heavily on understatement and his characteristic terseness. A strong example occurs at the end of "One of Twins". The narrator, John Stevens, has just killed a stranger who looks exactly like himself. His response is that "To know of a man that he is dead should be enough."³⁸ The most striking examples of Bierce's use of understatement are in his tall tales, where humor of the blackest stripe reigns. His 'parenticide club' stories are particularly rich in this regard, featuring, as they do, a variety of unrepentant narrators describing how they killed their parents in various bizarre ways for various reasons. "I removed the old man from this vale of tears. Having done

³⁷Bierce, "A Psychological Shipwreck", *Complete Stories*, pp. 191-92.

³⁸Bierce, "One of Twins", *Complete Stories*, p. 132.

so, I was a trifle uneasy. Not only was he my father--the author of my being--but the body would certainly be discovered."³⁹

Bierce shares certain stylistic devices with Poe and Lovecraft, but they are generally more baroque, more extreme in their psychological details and general descriptions. That is not to say that the ends of their various fictions are not similar, but that the means of attaining those ends are different.

Bierce's influence upon Lovecraft has been somewhat neglected by Lovecraft's critics, for of course Bierce was essentially a writer of *contes cruels*, tales of physical rather than of supernatural horror; yet Lovecraft owed a considerable debt to him. The kind of sardonic humor of which Lovecraft was so fond was clearly derived from Bierce . . . one of the opening sentences of Bierce's tales could pass very readily for a Lovecraft opening. However, Bierce's style was usually quite flat and prosaic, to point up the unexpectedness of the horror to come--an example which Lovecraft, of course, did not follow.⁴⁰

Lovecraft, of course, did not follow Bierce's lead in his general style, but, instead, that of Poe. His style is essentially a distillation of the elements tending towards cosmic fiction in Poe, and thus represents the evolution of Poe's branch of horror tale into the age of science. Lovecraft has often been charged with being careless about his style, and with proceeding breathlessly headlong because he knew no other or better style, but, in fact, perusal of his work and letters shows that "Lovecraft was exceedingly careful about the smallest nuances of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical structure".⁴¹ And critics have occasionally granted the effectiveness of such a style, admitting that in this 'special kind of morbid horror, a psychological detail, as conveyed by an emotionally charged adjective, is more effective than mere sensual description in any form'.⁴² The purpose of this style, as used by Poe and Lovecraft, is to identify the implied reader as strongly as possible with the main character, especially in stories told by first-person narrators. If that identification is strong enough, the reader will not immediately assume the narrator is insane when he begins to tell of the horrific events that have happened to him, as that reader otherwise quite possibly would. The implied reader is not immediately supposed to doubt the narrator's account and find it completely unbelievable, although a degree of initial disbelief and doubt is certainly constructed within the text. Rather, the reader is to go along with the narrator, sometimes believing a little more, sometimes believing a little less, until both are suddenly unable to doubt the fantastic element at the end of the story.

This aspect of the horror tale is not unique to Lovecraft, although, of the three, it has been commented on most heavily in his work. It is what Leiber has called

the device of *confirmation* rather than *revelation* . . . In other words, the story-ending does not come as a surprise, but as a final, long-anticipated 'convincer.' The reader knows, and is supposed to know, what is coming, but this only prepares and adds to his shivers when the narrator supplies the last and incontrovertible piece of evidence.⁴³

The reader may not believe the weird element before the terminal climax, but often he can see that something that will convince him is coming. The effect in such stories of Lovecraft's is thus somewhat similar to that of classical tragedy, where the audience knows fairly well what will happen and is certain what the ending will be, but that knowledge does not detract from the story but, in fact, heightens the suspense.

Bierce, however, generally does not give away the endings of his stories ahead of time, which has left him open to the charge of creating 'trick endings', but his endings do not play tricks merely for the purpose of showing that he can trick the reader. For example,

³⁹ Bierce, "An Imperfect Conflagration", *Complete Stories*, p. 405.

⁴⁰ J. Vernon Shea, "On the Literary Influences Which Shaped Lovecraft's Works", in Joshi, p. 125.

⁴¹ Faig and Joshi, in Joshi, p. 11.

⁴² Booth, p. 147.

⁴³ Leiber, in Joshi, p. 56.

the ending [of "Chickamauga"], then, plays two tricks: one on the child [protagonist] and one on the reader. Like the child, the reader suddenly learns he has not occupied some privileged position. Indeed, the double epiphany puts the reader in a situation analogous to that of the child. The reader, too, has unknowingly and with full confidence in his interpretive skill, been enacting this story only to find that crucial information has been withheld.⁴⁴

Once again, we are face to face with cosmic fiction, or its close cousin. It is in unfamiliar clothes, true, but the essential elements are here. The terminal climax, when the implied reader is not previously given a hint as to the eventual outcome of the story, shows that reader that he does not have a privileged position in the universe; that merely being the reader of a text does not give him the power of knowing all that is going on within that text.

A particularly striking example of the use of a terminal climax structure in a longer work is what may be termed the 'pyramiding' of the weird elements in *At the Mountains of Madness*. This story has not one but many climaxes, each one at a point of the story in which the reader has been forced to admit that yet another strange thing must be true. The story begins with an antarctic expedition, which finds a huge mountain range, larger than any ever seen before. The weird elements then begin: one sub-party of the expedition finds a number of alien bodies, very well-preserved creatures unlike any ever known, living on the earth or in fossil evidence; the other party arrives to find the camp destroyed, seemingly by intelligent hands, and that the alien bodies are missing; two men journey over the mountains to find a giant city; the city turns out to be the ancient capital of the strange aliens' civilization as the men read on the walls something of the history of the aliens; the men discover that the aliens found under the permafrost were somehow still alive, and it was they who destroyed the other camp and killed all the men therein; the men nevertheless come to see the aliens as 'men', intelligent beings like themselves, merely of a different type and race; the men discover that creatures called shoggoths, created by the aliens, are also still alive and seized the city from the aliens thousands of years before; they run in fear from a living shoggoth; flying away, to escape back over the mountain range, they sight a second mountain range, taller than the first, on the other side of the huge city; and, finally, the narrator says his companion Danforth saw something else, something over or in that second mountain range that left him little more than a babbling idiot for days. For every new weird event, all the stages of a short terminal climax story are run through. First the groundwork of belief is laid, then the reader begins to suspect, the narrator hints more strongly, the reader begins to believe, then (at the end) the narrator believes and states the truth, forcing the implied reader into belief. This structure is reinforced

by what may be called *orchestrated prose*--sentences that are repeated with a constant addition of more potent adjectives, adverbs, and phrases, just as in a symphony a melody introduced by a single woodwind is at last thundered by the whole orchestra.⁴⁵

All these devices imply that the story will be disbelieved by those who did not witness the weird element, and show that the narrator expects that his story will not initially be believed. This ties into the idea of the frightening as that which is unknown and thus unfamiliar, as it is not likely that someone will accept that something entirely new and horrible exists on hearsay evidence. In fact, Lovecraft's narrators in particular often mention that they do not particularly expect to be believed, or that "there were things involved which simply could not be believed by those who had not seen a sample, as indeed was made clear during certain subsequent investigations".⁴⁶ Often this sort of mention is accompanied by the narrator's attempt to give his 'credentials', so to speak, to show that he is reputable and should be believed.

⁴⁴Davidson, p. 44.

⁴⁵Leiber, in Joshi, p. 57.

⁴⁶Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror" (DH 186).

And now I want to assure you again, Eliot, that I'm no mollycoddle to scream at anything which shews a bit of departure from the usual. I'm middle-aged and decently sophisticated, and I guess you saw enough of me in France to know I'm not easily knocked out.⁴⁷

This expectation of disbelief also causes the narrators to become very scrupulous with the facts they are presenting, as the author constructs the narrator around the fact that the narrator is going to have to convince the reader of the weird element, and will need quite a few devices to do so. This is also very closely related to style. In Lovecraft's later, more 'scientific' style, and in the terse journalistic style of Bierce, this device is especially prevalent, as their respective narrators minutely describe what happened and often refuse to make any judgments about the supernatural elements of their experiences. The implied reader is often reminded to 'bear in mind closely that I did not see any actual visual horror at the end'.⁴⁸

Another example of a device used to heighten the tension of belief is the use in the text of an object, obtained somehow by the narrator during the weird events, which would prove conclusively that those events actually happened. This object is almost always lost, and thus the narrator is left in the position of ruing that he lost it, and telling the reader that he would have shown that reader this object, only it has been lost. This also has an ambivalent or mixed effect on the reader. If the reader believes that the object actually did exist at one point, then the point has already been accepted and there is no need for anything more. If the implied reader has not been given enough proof to accept the event, the implication is that the narrator may be lying about the whole thing and that the object was merely made up in his mind to try to add verisimilitude to his story. Interestingly, the objects in Lovecraft stories are almost without fail texts, perhaps taking a cue from Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*, in which the lost text is the climax of the story. In 'The Whisperer in Darkness' the objects are the letters of Henry Akeley, a recording of the aliens' voices, and photographs of dead aliens and of their footprints; in 'The Shadow out of Time' it is the history of the twentieth century that the narrator, Nathaniel Peaslee, himself wrote when he had switched minds with a member of the Great Race of Yith, and was living as one of that race in prehistoric times; and in 'The Mound' it is a manuscript written by a Spanish conquistador who had entered the underground world of K'n-yan but not returned. The primacy of the written must be noted, and provides a clue as to what Lovecraft thinks will prove the existence of the weird events he writes about.

With all these devices for forcing the reader to confront the horrors, and to convince him of their reality, occasionally there occurs an overdetermination of weird elements, a point when the narrator still refuses to believe in the weird (remains in fantastic) while the implied reader finds herself in the 'marvelous', as he has been given more than enough proof to believe in the weird events. When there is enough evidence to convince the implied reader, there must logically also be enough to make plausible the narrator's belief in the weird event or thing, but in these cases he still hesitates. Christine Brooks-Rose defines overdetermination by explaining that 'a code is overdetermined when its information (narrative, ironic, hermeneutic, symbolic, etc.) is too clear, overencoded, recurring beyond purely informational need'.⁴⁹ An overencoded horror story is one in which the horrors are a little too clear, with a little too much information given, but the narrator still will not believe in them. Bierce uses this device occasionally, such as in 'An Adventure in Brownville', wherein the unnamed narrator

went home, somewhat disturbed in mind, half doubting that I had heard or seen any living thing excepting the lizards. It all seemed a trifle odd and uncanny. It was as if among the several phenomena, objective and subjective, that made the sum total of the incident there had been a certain element which had diffused its dubious character over all--had leavened the whole mass with unreality. I did not like it.⁵⁰

⁴⁷Lovecraft, 'Pickman's Model' (DH 20).

⁴⁸Lovecraft, 'The Whisperer in Darkness' (DH 208).

⁴⁹Brooks-Rose, 'The Readerhood of Man', in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, eds. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crossman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 123.

⁵⁰Bierce, 'An Adventure at Brownville', *Collected Stories*, p. 214. One might say that any avowal of disbelief on the part of Bierce's narrators would be overdetermination, as his tales are generally too clear and too short to be disbelieved much at all. But that is another point entirely.

Lovecraft especially uses this device, his narrators often saying that "not for a moment did I believe that the tale had any really substantial foundation".⁵¹ Another way Lovecraft overdetermines his tales, to exploit that tension between believing reader and still disbelieving narrator, is through a variation on his orchestrated prose.

The first, fragmentary words were in a human voice--a mellow educated voice which sounded vaguely Bostonian in accent . . . His cultivated voice held an odd and almost disturbing hint of vague familiarity, though I could not definitely place it in my memory . . . "I suppose you recognized his voice as one of those on the record Mr. Akeley sent you."⁵²

The reader is obviously supposed to realize that the speaker in the second quoted section is the same as that on the record, especially due to the similarity of 'educated' and 'cultivated', neither of which is used to describe any other voice in the story, as well as the narrator's unfocused familiarity with the voice. The reader then feels smarter, more alert than the narrator, and is thus encouraged by the text to move ahead of the narrator and believe that the weird elements are true. In this way overdetermination serves to push the reader ahead of the story rather than using the usual device of pulling him behind the narrator.

In "The Shadow over Innsmouth", the reader and the unnamed narrator both are initially in disbelief. The narrator tries to soothe his nerves by reminding himself that he "must be in a highly nervous state to let a few random creakings set me off speculating in this fashion--but I regretted none the less that I was unarmed" (DH 344). This is an interesting case of a man who wishes to deny the weird but still wants to be able to defend himself against it. At the end of the story, the narrator is still not convinced, still

not even yet willing to say whether what followed was a hideous actuality or only a nightmare hallucination. The later action of the government, after my frantic appeals, would tend to confirm it as a monstrous truth; but could not that hallucination have been repeated under the quasi-hypnotic spell of that ancient, haunted, and shadowed town? Such places have strange properties, and the legacy of insane legend might well have acted on more than one human imagination amidst those dead, stench-cursed streets and huddles of rotting roofs and crumbling steeples. Is it not possible that the germ of an actual contagious madness lurks in the depths of that shadow over Innsmouth? Who can be sure of reality after hearing things like the tale of old Zadok Allen? (DH 359)

The narrator attempts to give an alternate, non-supernatural explanation that he thinks will be more believable, or which he wants to believe more than the supernatural explanation. However, the reader is quickly made to see how unconvincing and ridiculous this explanation is, which tends to push the reader into fully accepting the supernatural explanation.

Sometimes, the discrepancy between the narrator's belief and the implied reader's is even more starkly drawn, as in "The Shadow out of Time".

The more I reflected, the more convincing did my reasoning seem; till in the end I had a really effective bulwark against the visions and impressions which still assailed me. Suppose I did see strange things at night? These were only what I had heard and read of. Suppose I did have odd loathings and perspectives and pseudo-memories? These, too, were only echoes of myths absorbed in my secondary state. Nothing that I might dream, nothing that I might feel, could be of any actual significance. (DH 390-91)

The narrator's words are twisted ironically to show his near-hysterical denial of anything outside his normal experience. The fact that he phrases it "nothing is of any significance" constructs the reader as unable to believe in him. It is far too strong, far too all-encompassing. Of course, it is also the point of cosmic fiction, a point which the

⁵¹Lovecraft, "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (DH 334).

⁵²Lovecraft, "The Whisperer in Darkness" (DH 227, 245, 260).

implied reader will come to agree with later in the story, once he has been prepared for it. But stating it baldly like that will never convince the reader of its ultimate truth.

The reversal of the devices of overdetermination yields a reverse effect, underdetermination. Here, the writer or narrator deliberately undermines the weird elements of a story, as either the narrator specifically downplays the weird elements of the story, or the author makes specific comments in his own voice that tend to reduce the reliability of the narrator. Bierce often creates underdetermination by making quick statements in his own voice, giving the other side of the argument of belief and forcing the issue onto the reader. "There was something unearthly about it all, and I caught myself shuddering. But I was wet and cold."⁵³ There are now two perfectly good explanations, and the reader is not specifically constructed to privilege one reading over another. The decision is not specifically implied, as in the majority of the examples above, but, instead, it is a gap in the text,⁵⁴ into which an actual reader must step and make a decision. For another example, one of Bierce's stories begins: "In the summer of 1896 Mr. William Holt, a wealthy manufacturer of Chicago, was living temporarily in a little town of central New York, the name of which the writer's memory has not retained."⁵⁵ This statement is designed to bring the reader up short. If this is fiction, the implied reader is forced to ask, why does Bierce not make up a name? The reader then begins to wonder about the veracity of the tale, or to think about the story as if it were true. In this case underdetermination can actually aid the narrative illusion, but in general that is not its purpose within the story.

A subgrouping of underdetermination concerns the undermining of the difference between what the implied reader generally perceives as real and unreal or as real and dream. Poe once wrote that "when one dreams, and, in the dream, suspects that he dreams, the suspicion *never fails to confirm itself*, and the sleeper is almost immediately aroused";⁵⁶ but, in many of these stories, the differences between what is real and what is dream or unreal are deliberately obscured to help construct the reader in such a way that the reader will accept the weird portions of the narrative as truthful representations of reality. Perhaps the best example of this sort of device would be Lovecraft's "Dreamlands" stories. In these stories, when one dreams, one enters a different and more wondrous world, that, nevertheless, has specific geography, flora, fauna, and civilizations, similar to but not precisely like those of Earth. This leads to assertions such as "only a very expert dreamer could have used those imperceptible foot-holds, yet to Carter they were sufficient".⁵⁷ Lovecraft's narrators know well, and remind the reader, that "men of intellect know that there is no sharp distinction between the real and the unreal".⁵⁸ This breaking down of the barriers between real and unreal occurred in horror fiction long before the more literally acceptable genres picked up on it. Horror fiction, earlier than other genres, embodied "the sense that empirical reality is not as secure as it used to be . . . If the 'real' has come to seem unreal, it is natural to turn to the 'unreal' as real: the two propositions are interrelated".⁵⁹

But generally, and not surprisingly, mainstream critics have almost always misinterpreted cosmos-centered fiction when they have deigned to examine it.

If the novelist really believes that there is no objective meaning to existence, then his only motive for writing is that he wants to write—a motive no better and no worse in the ultimate scheme than would be the motive of a Hitler, or, let us say, a scrawler of graffiti. To worry about the reader would be absurd in a genuinely absurd universe.⁶⁰

Booth does not understand the motivations and aims of this sort of fiction and does not see that absurdity, in itself, is a claim for a sort of meaningfulness. If the universe is absurd, it is still comprehensible to humans; it is still intelligible

⁵³Bierce, "Moxon's Master", *Complete Stories*, p. 95.

⁵⁴I am indebted to Iser for the concept of infratextual 'gaps', place of non-determination into which the actual reader must enter to engage with the text and make a specific decision about how to read that text.

⁵⁵Bierce, "A Wireless Message", *Complete Stories*, p. 134.

⁵⁶Poe, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains", p. 293.

⁵⁷Lovecraft, *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (MM 332).

⁵⁸Lovecraft, "The Tomb" (D 3).

⁵⁹Brooks-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 4.

⁶⁰Booth, p. 394.

as a 'joke'. Booth's 'ultimate scheme of things' simply does not exist any more. "The universe is neither meaningful nor absurd. It quite simply *is*".⁶¹ Within the constructs of cosmic fiction, as we have seen, there is no universal morality, no ultimate meaning-making God, no good, no evil. There is merely space and the beings inhabiting it. To claim any more is to give humanity a preferential place in the cosmos that it does not deserve and from which physics had displaced it as early as the Renaissance.

To be blunt about it, the universe is simply non-signifying in these fictions. One can see this non-signification as a backlash against the pathetic fallacy taken to the n^{th} degree. The universe, and everything in it, does not and cannot stand for anything. It has no 'meaning' that can be elucidated from it. Literature, both popular and literary, tends to ignore this scientific point and act as if the eighteenth-century human-centered universe was still the accepted model of the reality. Cosmic fiction makes its reader 'unavoidably aware of the real's meaninglessness. Not its absurdity, which is in itself a significance, through which we saw reality earlier in the century, but its non-significance'.⁶² Very few writers even hint at the non-signifying nature of reality, and it would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to maintain such an attitude towards the work and towards the implied reader throughout an entire work. Neither the (actual) writer nor his narrator can act as if life is absolutely meaningless; that way lies madness. Acceptance of the meaninglessness of life is an intellectual acceptance, not an emotional one. Lovecraft's 'Figure in the carpet', and perhaps the major issue in Poe and Bierce as well, is precisely and simply this: that humanity is deluding itself when it believes that its actions and ideas have any larger meaning or significance in the cosmos.

Horror fiction has tended, in a historical process, to lean towards the cosmic, but to hint at it rather than to say anything directly. Horror, as we have seen, tends to concentrate on things that man does not know, never will know, and perhaps cannot know. I hasten to add that the genre of horror fiction does not necessarily imply only the field of supernatural horror, although the present discussion has generally kept within the smaller sub-field. The effects that horror or cosmic fiction aims for are not necessarily predicated on supernatural entities, though the supernatural is a natural area for horror to explore, as the writer can thereby explore more starkly the disjunction between the protagonist's (and humanity's in general) view of the world and the actual perceived world. Thus, Bierce's war stories, and other horrible stories of their ilk, are firmly within the field of horror. Bierce's tall tales are tangentially related, although the disjunction there is more usually between expected human action and actual human action.

The basis of this disjunction is embodied in Lovecraft's dictum that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown".⁶³ However, as was seen above, there is a contrary position, the category of the Freudian uncanny, which is "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar".⁶⁴ The true source of the frightening is somewhere in between the two positions. The absolutely unknown, of course, is undefinable, and so the relatively unknown, incorporating aspects of the familiar uncanny, is the general rule in horror fiction. Lovecraft's point was that the difference between these horrific creatures and our everyday reality is what causes us to fear them. His descriptions of them obviously derived from terrestrial biology and so on, but if the utterly unknown could be defined, it would no longer be unknown. Nevertheless, the familiar can never be as frightening or awe-inspiring as the wholly new, or even the mostly new. One may see the difference in the connotation of the words between the Freudian uncanny and the horrible. One is shocked by the uncanny, but the horrible elicits a stronger, more emotional reaction. To think something uncanny is an intellectual reaction; to think it horrible is a visceral one. It is obvious which is more deep-seated in the human psyche. The point of horror is then not precisely fear, as Lovecraft himself, as well as many other commentators, has said, but a dawning realization of the place of man in the universe. Fear may indeed be a component of this reaction, and almost necessarily the sole reaction in a naive reader, as it is natural to be frightened of what is completely new and alien, but one must not forget that cosmic fiction's essential purpose is to shake one's belief in an ordered universe.

But to create this atmosphere, to give the reader the impression that he is not a privileged being in an ordered universe, has not been easy. Mankind understands jokes, so to say that the ultimate meaning of the universe is a joke

⁶¹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Snapshots - Towards a New Novel*, as quoted in Brooks-Rose, p. 293.

⁶² Brooks-Rose, p. 10.

⁶³ Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature" (D 365).

⁶⁴ Freud, *The "Uncanny"*, p. 220.

is not incredibly difficult. But to say that the very concept of meaning does not apply at all, that the ultimate reality is pure chaos and meaninglessness, is not as simple. Lovecraft's universe is ruled by a mindless, amorphous being at the center of the galaxy called Azathoth. It is not merely a horrible thing; it is the creator-god of the universe. And 'such a chief deity can symbolize only one thing: the purposeless, mindless, yet all-powerful universe of materialistic belief'.⁶⁵

Man is used to thinking of himself as having a place and a purpose in the universe. Until the Industrial Revolution, no one would even have thought to question it. God was in his heaven and all was good on the earth. But with the twentieth century, science has discovered that there is something fundamentally incomprehensible about the cosmos. We may create models of particles, we may learn the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle and think we understand it, but it is all only on an intellectual level. It is all merely information. It is not a mind-set; we cannot think, in any sort of a cognitive model, of the universe as it truly is. We will always desire meaning where there is none to be found. Horror writers were the first to see the oncoming revolution and work its ideas into their stories. With Poe, this shows up as an interest in the irrationality of humans, an idea that pure cognition is faulty and cannot contain the universe, but with Bierce there is the definite idea of a universe that, if not actively hostile to man, is at least not interested in man and certainly was not created to be man's plaything. In Lovecraft, this becomes the central theme of his work, the overriding impulse of his writing: to point out the inconsequentiality of man and his works in a huge and uninterested cosmos.

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.⁶⁶

Because horror strives to break down the human mental construct of the universe, it must necessarily work even harder than other forms of literature to create belief in the world depicted. "Every literary work of any power--whether or not its author composed it with his audience in mind--is in fact an elaborate system of controls over the reader's involvement and detachment along various lines of interest",⁶⁷ but in horror, the controls have been used more often and more subtly, to force the reader to believe the story and confront the true face of reality. The horror story must be believable, at all costs, for if the suspension of disbelief lags for one moment, the reader is back in his safe little world of meaning, and the story cannot recapture him. Thus, a horror story that can maintain this atmosphere until the very end, that can force the reader to confront the true reality of the universe is rather rare, and even the masters, as we have seen, do not achieve this complete effect in every story. As has been shown, horror uses many, many devices for hooking the reader into the story and holding him there, especially devices designed to elicit a feeling that this world is completely coherent and coterminous with the reader's own. Cosmic fiction must start from that sort of identification, but, in the end, its purpose is to shake any and all identifications the reader has: to the story, to the fictional world, to the real world, to anything. If it does this for but a moment at the end of a story, it has succeeded.

⁶⁵Fritz Leiber, "A Literary Copernicus", in Joshi, p. 54.

⁶⁶Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu" (DH 125).

⁶⁷Booth, p. 123.

Lovecraft's Ethical Philosophy

By S. T. Joshi

[The following is a portion from S. T. Joshi's forthcoming study, *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* (Starmont House).--Ed.]

Our first issue in dealing with Lovecraft's ethics is in fact metaphysical: how can Lovecraft, a determinist (hence one who presumably denies moral responsibility), offer ethical precepts at all? What is the point of even having an ethical system if one denies free will? This is, curiously, not nearly so difficult a problem--at least in practise--as one might suppose; for the issue turns on the critical difference between determinism and fatalism. Fatalism is an illegitimate extension of determinism in asserting that, since all things are determined, all human action is futile and we must simply give in to "fate". The fallacy is one that Lovecraft early recognised: "We have no specific destiny against which we can fight--for the fighting would be as much a part of the destiny as the final end" (SL I.132). Now this is Lovecraft's argument for determinism, but in effect it could serve as his argument for a sort of free will also: since destiny is something that is enmeshed in the fabric of existence, it is for that reason undetectable; and we can continue engaging in any actions we please because those activities would be as much (or as little) a part of destiny as the failure to act. As Lovecraft himself wrote in 1931:

It was of course recognised by determinists that behind any proximate base must lie the general flux of the universe, be it simple or complex; that is, that in the last analysis each human act can be no less than the inevitable result of every antecedent and circumambient condition in an eternal cosmos. This recognition, however, did not prevent such thinkers from continuing to seek for the more proximate base or bases, and to speculate upon the immediate strings by which human puppets are moved.¹

This notion of *proximate* causes is of the greatest significance, for it allows Lovecraft not only to bypass determinism (and, essentially, to render it a purely metaphysical conception with no ethical ramifications) but eventually to shed his "cosmic pessimism" (as he calls it in "A Confession of Unfaith") and adopt a sort of quasi-humanistic "indifferentism".

The keynote of Lovecraft's early ethics was what he labels, in "A Confession of Unfaith", "cynical materialism". One supposes that Schopenhauer was at least one source for this view. It is difficult to know when Lovecraft first read Schopenhauer: the first mention I have found of him in Lovecraft is the celebrated aside "Shades of Schopenhauer!!!!!" (SL I.32) in 1916, after Lovecraft records how he was called "Little Sunshine" in infancy. Could Schopenhauer have been among the philosophers read around 1906 during Lovecraft's philosophical initiate (cf. SL I.70)? It is quite possible.

¹"Some Causes of Self-Immolation", in *Marginalia* (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1944), p. 184.

If one were to ask how and why Schopenhauer was a pessimist, the answer would not be easily forthcoming. The *Studies in Pessimism* (1890)—the extent, evidently, of Lovecraft's reading of the German philosopher; I am certain he never attempted Schopenhauer's great work, *The World as Will and Representation* (1818-44)—is not only a very brief ethical work but is a compilation by Schopenhauer's English translator T. Bailey Saunders, most of the papers being taken from Schopenhauer's *Parerga et Paralipomena*; and it appears that the metaphysical support for Schopenhauer's pessimism is to be found either there or in his major work. Still, the first paragraph of "On the Sufferings of the World" offers some suggestions:

Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance. Each separate misfortune, as it comes, seems, no doubt, to be something exceptional; but misfortune in general is the rule.²

The notion is that pain, being so evidently and inextricably a part of human experience, cannot be a mere byproduct of existence, but an integral part of it. Schopenhauer, like Lovecraft, cannot accept original sin as the ultimate cause of our miseries—in any case, few secularist philosophers have failed to note the theistic difficulty in accounting for misery when God is said to be both omnipotent and benevolent—and so he embraces pain outright; but he does not do so consistently and uniformly. If one really believes that suffering is the "object" of existence, then one is obliged to assert that the actual infliction of pain is the only (or at least the principal) moral good; but this is not Schopenhauer's position, as we shall shortly see.

I am not ready to argue for the priority of Schopenhauerianism over Epicureanism in Lovecraft's thought. While it is true that the first mention in Lovecraft of Epicurus as an ethical philosopher occurs nearly three years after that of Schopenhauer (SL I.87), it is also certain that Lovecraft read Lucretius very early. What is more, Lovecraft's cauinciation of Epicurean principles seems rather gloomier than he had any right to make it. Lovecraft expresses Epicurean doctrine faithfully at one point:

Remember that the goal of the great Epicurus was not an earthly *hedone* (Hedonism), or pleasure, but a lofty *ataraxia* (Ataraxia), or freedom from cares and trivial thoughts. (SL I.87)

But only two paragraphs before this he has written:

There is a real restfulness in the scientific conviction that nothing matters very much; that the only legitimate aim of humanity is to minimise acute suffering for the majority, and to derive whatever satisfaction is derivable from the exercise of the mind in the pursuit of truth. (SL I.87)

which is at least founded in Schopenhauer. Similarly, Lovecraft later writes: "To enjoy tranquillity, and to promote tranquillity in others, is the most enduring of delights. Such was the doctrine of Epicurus, the leading ethical philosopher of the world" (SL I.111). But directly before and after this utterance we find this:

One should come to realise that all life is merely a comedy of vain desire, wherein those who strive are the clowns, and those who calmly and dispassionately watch are the fortunate ones who can laugh at the acts of the strivers. The utter emptiness of all the recognised goals of human endeavour is to the detached spectator deliciously apparent—the tomb yawns and grins so ironically! . . . If one's interest in life wanes, let him turn to the succour of others in a like plight, and some grounds for interest will be observed to return. (SL I.111)

Compare this with *Studies in Pessimism*:

²Studies in Pessimism, in Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer, translated by T. Bailey Saunders (New York: Wiley Book Co., 191-?), p. 1.

The best consolation in misfortune or affliction of any kind will be the thought of other people who are in a still worse plight than yourself; and this is a form of consolation open to every one. But what an awful fate this means for mankind as a whole!³

It is as if Lovecraft were somehow fusing Schopenhauerianism and Epicureanism. Even the passage in Lovecraft's letter about "those who calmly and dispassionately watch" seems to be derived not from Schopenhauer but from the magnificent poem to Book II of Lucretius:

What joy it is, when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring! Not that anyone's afflictions are in themselves a source of delight; but to realize from what troubles you yourself are free is joy indeed. . . . But this is the greatest joy of all: to stand aloof in a quiet citadel, stoutly fortified by the teaching of the wise, and to gaze down from that elevation on others wandering aimlessly in a vain search for the way of life, pitting their wits one against another, disputing for precedence, struggling night and day with unstinted effort to scale the pinnacles of wealth and power. (II.1-13; tr. R. E. Latham)

Although Lovecraft weaned himself away from the extremes of Schopenhauerian pessimism with the passage of time, a certain core of it remained to the end:

Ol' Art Schopenhauer had the straight goods--however you look at it, there's so goddam much *more* pain than pleasure in any average human life, that it's a losing game unless a guy can pep it up with pure moonshine--either the literal 95-proof pink-snake-evoker, or the churchly hootch of belief in immortality and a benign old gentleman with long whiskers (ah, for the debates of yore!!) and a cosmick purpose . . . or else the Dunsanian conjuration of an illusion of *fantastick and indefinite possibility* as shadow'd forth in certain aesthetick interpretation of selected objective phenomena, time-sequences, and cosmical and dimensional speculations. (SL III.139-40)

The aesthetic dimension Lovecraft gives to the idea is of great significance, as it really lays the groundwork for his entire theory of the weird.

If we analyse what we have learned so far of Lovecraft's ethics, we can see several basic strands and chains of reasoning:

Given that mankind has no considerable place in the cosmos, two courses of action are possible:

- 1) one can adopt an impersonal and "cosmic" viewpoint centring on objectivity of outlook and intellect;
- 2) one can help others and lessen their misery.

All this is very laudable, but it does not seem that either condition follows from the premise. In fact, I cannot see that any ethical conclusion can possibly follow from the premise of man's cosmic inconsequence: it is simply a brute fact of existence and is in itself morally neutral. And yet, Lovecraft in his early years continued to assert one or the other of these ethical conclusions:

1) The secret of true contentment . . . lies in the achievement of a *cosmical* point of view. (SL I.112)

2) . . . warmth of heart and natural good feeling . . . form, in a cosmos devoid of absolute values or fixt purpose, the highest and most considerable things we may justly reckon as values. (SL I.247)

³Ibid., p. 2.

Lovecraft is not entirely to be blamed for tossing off such unfounded ethical precepts; his forerunner Democritus seems to have done much the same (and with as little concern for the role of ethics in a deterministic system), and in any case most of Lovecraft's remarks as uttered in letters are gauges of his wavering emotional state rather than formal philosophical dicta. Certainly one of the most poignant of his remarks, whatever its ethical value, is as follows:

About the time I joined the United I was none too fond of existence. I was 23 years of age, and realised that my infirmities would withhold me from success in the world at large. Feeling like a cipher, I felt I might as well be erased. But later I realised that even success is empty. Failure though I be, I shall reach a level with the greatest--and the smallest--in the damp earth or on the final pyre. And I saw that in the interim trivialities are not to be despised. Success is a relative thing--and the victory of a boy at marbles is equal to the victory of an Octavius at Actium when measured by the scale of cosmic infinity. So I turned to observe other mediocre and handicapped persons about me, and found pleasure in increasing the happiness of those who could be helped by such encouraging words or critical services as I am capable of furnishing. That I have been able to cheer here and there an aged man, an infirm old lady, a dull youth, or a person deprived by circumstances of education, affords to me a sense of being not altogether useless, which almost forms a substitute for the real success I shall never know. What matter if none hear of my labours, or if those labours touch only the afflicted and the mediocre? Surely it is well that the happiness of the unfortunate be made as great as possible; and he who is kind, helpful, and patient with his fellow-sufferers, adds as truly to the world's combined fund of tranquillity as he who, with greater endowments, promotes the birth of empires, or advances the knowledge of civilisation and mankind. (SL I.111-12)

I think this passage may help us to understand why Lovecraft initially derived pessimism from cosmicism. His various comments to the contrary notwithstanding, I suspect Lovecraft *did* suffer a sort of "disillusion" when he contemplated the myriad worlds of infinite space; the first reaction may well have been one of exhilaration, but perhaps not much later there came to him the sensation of the utter futility of all human effort in light of the vastness of the cosmos and the inconsequentiality of mankind in it. Such a sensation may be psychologically understandable but, in the final analysis, philosophically invalid--especially in terms of the "proximate values" notion, by which one could quite logically attribute a *local* or "human" importance to human affairs even if they lacked importance in the absolute, cosmic sense. Lovecraft then turned this pessimism to his advantage, and it became a bulwark against the little tragedies of his own existence--his failure to graduate from high school and enter college; his failure to secure a job; his dissatisfaction with the progress of his writing--since these things could (again invalidly) be regarded as cosmically unimportant, however large they loomed in his own circumstances. From all this it becomes clear that--once again contrary to his own assertions--Lovecraft was ruled much more by his emotions in his early years than by his abstract intellect.

Lovecraft's gradual abandonment of Schopenhauerian pessimism is interesting to note, because he never really gave it up entirely. We have seen how, as late as 1930, he was still reiterating Schopenhauer's claim as to the relative preponderance of pain over pleasure in existence (SL III.139); and later Lovecraft seems to recommend a stoic forbearance of the woes of existence and a

realistic facing of the conditions of existence, with all their inevitable frustrations and shortcomings, and a philosophical determination *not to expect more than its mediocre pittance of contentment which the cosmos actually has to offer*. (SL V.4)

But this letter was written to Helen Sully, and the course of Lovecraft's correspondence with her makes it clear that she was an excessively sensitive individual who was suffering a fairly uniform bout of depression ("Sorry that dealings with members of the so-called human race prove perplexing at times"--SL V.112); this is why Lovecraft perhaps exaggerated his own disadvantages ("I'm probably a thousand times worse off than you are"--SL V.191), so that he could counter with the view that, if he were relatively happy, then *she* should be so much the more so. In more abstract discussions Lovecraft condemns both misanthropy--

Anti-humanism, in its extreme phases, becomes exceedingly ridiculous; since it assumes as many values of purely arbitrary unreality as does pro-humanism. Both attitudes are essentially silly and unscientific, since mankind is merely one type of matter among many, and no more to be loved and respected, or hated and repudiated, than any other type of matter. (SL II.165)

and the pessimism/optimism dichotomy in enunciating his own indifferentism:

Contrary to what you may assume, I am *not a pessimist* but an *indifferentist*--that is, I don't make the mistake of thinking that the resultant of the natural forces surrounding and governing organic life will have any connexion with the wishes or tastes of any part of that organic life-process. Pessimists are just as illogical as optimists; insomuch as both envisage the aims of mankind as unified, and as having a direct relationship (either of frustration or of fulfilment) to the inevitable flow of terrestrial motivation and events. That is--both schools retain in a vestigial way the primitive concept of a conscious teleology--of a cosmos which gives a damn one way or the other about the especial wants and ultimate welfare of mosquitoes, rats, lice, dogs, men, horses, pterodactyls, trees, fungi, dodos, or other forms of biological energy. (SL III.39)

And yet, when it suits his argument, Lovecraft can snap back with: "*All life is fundamentally and inextricably sad*" (SL III.292). There is no strict contradiction in all this, since the "sadness" of life here postulated is not a product of some active malevolence of Nature (as would be implied in pessimism) but an inevitable result of the eternal gulf between human ideals and actualities. In this sense Lovecraft never had occasion to deviate from the view he claimed to have evolved early on, when he notes in "A Confession of Unfaith" that by age twenty-four he had come to gain an "immeasurable pity for man's eternal tragedy of aspirations beyond the possibility of fulfilment".

In the course of the twenties Lovecraft came to adopt the (genuinely) Epicurean position that, given the relativity of values, each person should pursue whatever gives him the greatest pleasure. Rational, systematic, and in congruence with his general metaphysics as this was, it ultimately gave way to another position that Lovecraft never managed to defend especially well; but first let us examine the earlier view. Somewhat curiously, this position was initially seen as a direct result of cosmicism:

The cosmos . . . is simply a perpetual rearrangement of electrons which is constantly seething as it always has been and always will be. Our tiny globe and puny thoughts are but one momentary incident in its eternal mutation; so that the life, aims, and thoughts of mankind are of the utmost triviality and ridiculousness. We are conscious by accident, and during the unfortunate instant that we are so, it behooves us only to mitigate our pain and pass our time as agreeably as we may. Since good sense shews us, that pleasure is but a balance betwixt desire and fulfilment; 'tis the part of reason to avoid needless labour by having as few wants as possible, and gratifying them in a manner so quiet as not to encroach on the pleasure of others and stir them up against us. (SL I.260-61)

Lovecraft defended a version of this view to the end of his life; and it is here that he introduced the notion of *proximate realities* (the phrase is actually used--although in a metaphysical and not ethical context--at SL II.86). The clearest passage is in a letter of 1936:

Now since man means nothing in the cosmos, it is plain that his only logical goal (a goal whose sole reference is to *himself*) is simply the achievement of a reasonable equilibrium which shall enhance his likelihood of experiencing the sort of reactions he wishes, and which shall help along his natural impulse to increase his differentiation from unorganised force and matter. This goal can be reached only through teaching individual men how best to keep out of each other's way, and how best to reconcile the various conflicting instincts which a haphazard cosmic drift has placed within the breast of the same person. Here, then, is a practical and imperative system of ethics, resting on the firmest possible foundation and being essentially that taught by Epicurus and Lucretius. (SL V.241)

Lovecraft is slightly exaggerating the relationship to Epicureanism, since Epicurus and Lucretius never really developed the cosmic backdrop Lovecraft here adopts.

The relativity of values is stressed (here in a discussion of aesthetics, although the applicability to ethics is obvious) in a letter of 1928:

Value is wholly relative, and the very idea of such a thing as meaning postulates a symmetrical relation to something else. No one thing, cosmically speaking, can be either good or evil, beautiful or unbeautiful, for entity is simply entity. (SL II.234)

I shall want to return to this passage (or, rather, to the continuation of this passage) later; but let us pursue the thread of this conception. Lovecraft is tireless in repeating this view, especially to his religiously inclined correspondents, since they would be the most inclined to insist on an absolutist ethics. Lovecraft wrote the following to James Ferdinand Morton in 1930:

... *nothing has any intrinsic value*. The only human values are sensations--and what the wise man will seek are simply the objects and conditions which may *for him* serve as symbols to evoke the especial sensations... whose function it is to make existence seem worth prolonging. Of course the particular objects and conditions will be different for every man, since each of us has a different nature and therefore a different symbolism apparatus. (SL III.125)

Now Morton was, in fact, a fervent atheist--so fervent that Lovecraft chastised him for it in the early poem "The Isaacsonio-Mortoniad" (1915)--so that it is conceivable that Morton was insisting on some uniform ethical standard or mode of behaviour applicable to everyone. Similarly, to the Catholic August Derleth Lovecraft writes:

Each person lives in his own world of values, and can obviously (except for a few generalities based on essential similarities in human nature) speak only for himself when he calls this thing "silly and irrelevant" and that thing "vital and significant", as the case may be. We are all meaningless atoms adrift in the void. (SL III.222)

All this is entirely unexceptionable, and yet it gradually gives way to a much less defensible view; and that is that, given the relativity of values, the only true anchor of fixity is tradition--specifically the racial and cultural tradition out of which each person grows. Actually, I am not entirely convinced that this is a development of the purely relativistic view; it really seems to have worked concurrently with it, gradually gaining greater and greater emphasis with the passage of time. We can, in fact, find it expressed in a very crude form as early as a letter to Frank Belknap Long in 1924:

You see, Sonny, nothing really amounts to anything; and the deepest learning and wildest pleasure merely turn to ashes before one may enjoy them. Little urban fops chase about after pleasure and get only weariness; serious artists struggle away at tasks that never satisfy them, and that lead only to a fame which never does them any good; grave scholars wear out their lives gathering facts that form but a tasteless and sterile harvest... futility interminable and all ingulphing!... So I believe that the soundest course for a man of sense is to put away the complexity and sophistication of an unhappy age, and to return into the seclusion and simplicity of a rural 'Squire; loving old, ancestral, and quaintly beautiful things, and thinking old, simple, manly, heroick thoughts which--even when not true--are surely beautiful because they bear upon them so much of the ivy of tradition. (SL I.284)

If this has any value at all it is as a signal for Lovecraft's growing disenchantment with the Decadent pose he had adopted--a pose which Frank Long no doubt encouraged significantly. It is transparently obvious that not all "men of sense" could find this return to tradition aesthetically satisfying, since each one of us has (as Lovecraft has himself admitted elsewhere) been subject to different environmental influences and are accordingly inclined to different

tastes. Lovecraft throughout his life wavered between (validly) recommending tradition *for himself* and (invalidly) recommending it *for everyone*; and I think this is a product of what I have termed Lovecraft's intellectual fascism, where he somehow expected everyone (at least everyone of his cultural background) to think and feel as he did.

To illustrate this tendency on Lovecraft's part, it may be worth citing a passage (not designed as a formal ethical utterance) from a late essay, "Some Current Motives and Practices" (1936). Here Lovecraft is censuring an outbreak of personal attacks in the world of amateur journalism:

That the N.A.P.A. [National Amateur Press Association] can--or should--attempt to control the private ethics and individual taste of its various members is greatly to be doubted. It is the function of other social forces to do whatever can be done toward redeeming this or that person from the sway of paltry emotions, primitive perspectives, blunted group-consciousness, and a distorted sense of proportion. What amateurdom may well attempt is simply to oppose the use of its own facilities . . . as agents in the exercise of loutish personal rancour and gratuitous small-boy brutality. It does not pay to encourage practices which place the institution in a cheap and contemptible light, and tend to alienate the best type of members and prospective members.⁴

The number of "loaded" ethical terms and conceptions in this brief passage is remarkable; and Lovecraft is here assuming precisely the sort of ethical uniformity that he elsewhere finds it expedient to reject. It may be countered that the above essay was not designed as a statement on ethics, and that we should accordingly not expect Lovecraft to adhere to any philosophical precision in his utterances; but what a passage like this indicates is the degree to which Lovecraft customarily assumed the self-evident validity of his own beliefs except when compelled into specifically philosophical debates.

I do not suppose we can find (or ought to look for) a philosophical source for Lovecraft's view as to the soundness of tradition; it is clearly an attempt to justify his own antiquarianism, attachment to the past, and Victorian upbringing. Still, it is odd that we have a hint of it in a work that may have influenced Lovecraft considerably, Remy de Gourmont's *A Night in the Luxembourg* (1906), which Lovecraft read in 1923 (SL I.250). This perfumed philosophical prose-poem first utters a paean to Epicurus as inventor of the relativity of values:

But Epicurus was perhaps still nearer to my heart. His natural and more genial sensibility produced, under my breath, a more beautiful intellectual flower. He knew one part of wisdom, and was not the dupe of analogies. Intelligent, he did not go and suppose a universal intelligence, inventing systems, poems, and useful practices for the happiness of man; he did not go and suppose a supreme creator. He understood that the temperaments of men are diverse, and did not advise a uniform pleasure. He taught pleasure, that is to say the art of being happy according to one's nature. I loved Epicurus.⁵

Then it makes the provocative statement: "Knowing the vanity of everything, of religions, of philosophies and of ethics, submit outwardly to customs, to prejudices, and to tradition" (154-55). I suspect, however, that this correspondence is accidental; in any case, the view was so logical a development of Lovecraft's entire outlook that a mere literary or philosophical influence would not sufficiently account for the tenacity with which Lovecraft espoused it.

Let us return to the critical "Value is wholly relative" statement (SL II.234). Directly after the passage I quoted we find this:

The qualities of goodness and beauty are altogether local and temporary things, measurable only as the mental-physical-imaginative responses of organic beings of a given type and training to certain forms of relationship with given backgrounds made familiar through structure and experience. . . . Given a sound

⁴ *Some Current Motives and Practices* [De Land, FL: R. H. Barlow, 1936].

⁵ *A Night in the Luxembourg*, preface and appendix by Arthur Ransome (New York: Modern Library, [1926]), p. 85. Subsequent references will occur in the text.

Puritan ancestry--whether we like it or not--and a childhood amidst the civilisation which those ancestors wrought, we simply cannot help having a more vital relationship to matter created from the deep, instinctive feelings of that Puritan blood and fabric than to exotic matter based on patterns with which our contact has been purely objective and academic. (SL II.234-35)

Again, the discussion is aesthetic, but Lovecraft's ethics provided a source for his aesthetics just as much as his ethics provided a source for his aesthetics. The flaw in the reasoning comes in assuming a vastly greater uniformity of "mental-physical-imaginative responses" in a given race or culture-stream than actually exists; it is the fundamental flaw in Lovecraft's racism as well. Consider this passage:

No one thinks or feels or appreciates or lives a mental-emotional-imaginative life at all, except in terms of the artificial reference-points supply'd him by the enveloping body of race-tradition and heritage into which he is born. We form an emotionally realisable picture of the external world, and an emotionally endurable set of illusions as to values and direction in existence, solely and exclusively through our traditional culture-stream. Without this stream around us we are absolutely adrift in a meaningless and irrelevant chaos which has not the least capacity to give us any satisfaction apart from the trifling animal ones. Pleasure and pain, time and space, relevance and non-relevance, good and evil, interest and non-interest, direction and purpose, beauty and ugliness--all these words, comprising virtually everything within the scope of normal human life, are absolutely blank and without counterparts in the sphere of actual entity save in connexion with the artificial set of reference points provided by cultural heritage. Without our nationality--that is, our culture-grouping--we are merely wretched nuclei of agony and bewilderment in the midst of alien and directionless emptiness. (SL III.207)

There are several curious things about this passage. First, for all Lovecraft's tirades against Marxist philosophy and aesthetics, the view here expressed corresponds amazingly well with the developed Marxist theory that all our responses--not merely political, but ethical, aesthetic, and even metaphysical (as Lovecraft suggests by the reference to "time and space")--are culturally conditioned. Secondly, and more importantly, it seems so obvious that this whole position is entirely self-serving--that it is Lovecraft who would be a "wretched nucleus of agony and bewilderment" without his sense of placement in the Anglo-American culture--that it is difficult to see how Lovecraft could not have been aware of it. The mere fact that Lovecraft must express this view so vehemently--in particular to his younger correspondents--ought to have suggested to him that this sort of cultural conditioning was itself gradually weakening in the early decades of the century, as uniformity of race and culture were giving way to heterogeneity, sophistication, and cosmopolitanism. Occasionally Lovecraft comes to his senses and recognises that this sort of identification with (his own) tradition is purely subjective:

... for the average person there is a need for personal anchorage to some system of landmarks larger than the ego yet smaller than the cosmos-at-large--a system of anchorage which can supply standards of comparison in the fields of size, nature, distance, direction, and so on, as demanded for the fulfilment of the normal sense of interest and dramatic action. Probably everybody has to have such a system--the differences being in the way various people envisage and express it. Religious people seek a mystical identification with a system of hereditary myths; whereas I, who am non-religious, seek a corresponding mystical identification with the only immediate tangible external reality which my perceptions acknowledge--i.e., the continuous stream of folkways around me. . . . I follow this acceptance purely for my own personal pleasure--because I would feel lost in a limitless and impersonal cosmos if I had no way of thinking of myself but as a dissociated and independent point. (SL III.244)

But this view is not consistent in Lovecraft, and he more often lapses into the paradox of offering an absolutist ethic of his own while at the same time scorning others for so doing:

In a cosmos without absolute values we have to rely on the relative values affecting our daily sense of comfort, pleasure, and emotional satisfaction. What gives us relative painlessness and contentment we may arbitrarily call "good", and vice versa. This local nomenclature is necessary to give us that benign illusion of placement, direction, and stable background on which the still more important illusions of "worthwhileness", dramatic significance in events, and interest in life depend. Now what gives one person or race or age relative painlessness and contentment often disagrees sharply on the psychological side from what gives these same boons to another person or race or age. Therefore "good" is a relative and variable quality, depending on ancestry, chronology, geography, nationality, and individual temperament. Amidst this variability there is *only one anchor of fixity* which we can seize upon as the working pseudo-standard of "values" which we need in order to feel settled and contented--and that anchor is *tradition*, the potent emotional legacy bequeathed to us by the massed experience of our ancestors, individual or national, biological or cultural. Tradition means nothing cosmically, but it means everything locally and pragmatically because we have nothing else to shield us from a devastating sense of "lostness" in endless time and space. (SL II.356-57)

The degree to which this view can be carried is well exhibited in a letter of 1929:

All [my italics] our feelings and loyalties are based on the special instincts and inherited values of our immediate racial and cultural group--take these away, and absolutely nothing remains for any average person to anchor his sense of direction, interest, or standards to. (SL III.44)

It is also of some interest to note that Lovecraft came to find his affiliation for the past as fundamentally non-rational:

One does not have to take these traditions and folkways seriously, in an intellectual way, and one may even laugh at their points of naïveté and delusion--as indeed I laugh at the piety, narrowness, and conventionality of the New England background which I love so well and find so necessary to contentment. (SL III.244)

Lovecraft thereby falls into a trap recognised by Joseph Wood Krutch, who also condemns Russell and Santayana for what he terms "ironic belief":

Certain philosophers, clinging desperately to the idea of a humanized world, have proposed a retreat into the imagination. Bertrand Russell in his popular essay, *A Free Man's Worship*, Unamuno and Santayana *passim* throughout their works, have argued that the way of salvation lay in a sort of ironic belief, in a determination to act as though one still believed the things which once were really held true. But is not this a desperate expedient, a last refuge likely to appeal only to the leaders of a lost cause? Does it not represent the last, least substantial, phase of fading faith, something which borrows what little substance it seems to have from a reality of the past? If it seems half real to the sons of those who lived in the spiritual world of which it is a shadow, will it not seem, a little further removed, only a faint futility? Surely it has but little to oppose to those who come armed with the certitudes of science and united with, not fleeing from the nature mid which they live.⁶

Krutch certainly seems to be correct: three generations after Lovecraft the notion of adhering to any sort of racial or cultural stream seems very remote to us. Lovecraft would not seem to have any especial answer to Krutch, save to insist that he *did* feel this way--felt it psychologically if not intellectually. Hence he writes to August Derleth: "The only conceivable value in existence is the satisfaction of the emotions; and if the elder ways will accomplish this as well as--or better than--the newer ways, then I'm all for the antique stuff!"⁷ Here again Lovecraft recognises that the "elder ways" are what will satisfy (only) *his* emotions; but he is not always so consistent as this.

⁶The Modern Temper (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), pp. 21-22. Subsequent references will occur in the text.

⁷Lovecraft to August Derleth, 26 September 1929 (ms., State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

As Lovecraft's political consciousness began to be awakened in the 1930s, he becomes still more circumspect in enunciating his return to tradition:

What honest materialists like me cast away is not the credo of our fathers. That was gone long ago, whether we like the loss or not. The thing cast away is simply the pretence of adhering to an old and devitalised credo. I believe I am firmly sound in holding the *forms* of antiquity to be more truly capable of preservation than the *beliefs*. The beliefs *cannot* survive today--hence the greatest traditionalist is he who clings to the residue which *can* conceivably (though not certainly) survive. Yesterday's beliefs are nothing--they do not and cannot exist. But the forms are at least forms--tangible rhythms, which do not need to pretend to be anything other than they are. There is nothing else of the past to keep. (SL III.331)

This constitutes a sort of makeshift response to Krutch--hold on to as much of the past as can be salvaged--but I don't think Krutch would be convinced: this view seems very close to the "monotonous repetition of once living creeds" that Krutch condemned in "weak and uninstructed intellects" (19). Lovecraft's final utterance on the subject is as follows:

For my part, I do not believe that any *absolute values* exist; but on the other hand, I cannot help noting that certain types of *attitude*--harmonisation with patterns and backgrounds which long familiarity has raised to the status of a workable (even if fortuitous and illusory) system of reference-points--invariably conduce (even when consciously adopted or preserved without reference to foundation in cosmic truth) toward an adjustment of the individual to his environment which is distinctly less painful (because it preserves to a great extent the illusions of direction, meaning, and interest in life) than any other possible adjustment would seem to be. Thus I am a complete sceptic and a thorough conservative at the same time. My attitude toward a traditional value is to hang on to it (as an aesthetic act) as long as possible, if it is not positively anti-social as judged by the most genuine and permanent factors in human happiness and welfare. (SL IV.228)

This does nothing to escape Krutch's principal criticism--the folly of trying to believe in things one knows to be false or outmoded (as Lovecraft quite consciously acknowledges by his persistent references to the "illusions of direction, meaning, and interest in life")--and also shows Lovecraft's desperation for clinging to as much of the past as he could even if many facets of that past (religious, cultural, political, economic) had been repudiated by Lovecraft himself. The notion that Lovecraft is retaining traditional values "as an aesthetic act" is interesting, in that Lovecraft claimed to base his entire ethics on aesthetics; but here it strikes one as an awfully thin and insubstantial basis for conduct--and it fails to account for the degree of Lovecraft's sensitivity to violations of these traditional codes of behaviour.

This cultural or racial basis for ethics is something Lovecraft uses quite fallaciously to justify some of his own predilections or prejudices in behaviour, attire, and social comportment. In 1924 he wrote that "I have no respect or reverence whatever for any person who does not live abstemiously and purely" (SL I.315). Lovecraft might get away with this by claiming it an irrational prejudice, but unfortunately he does not do so; for he adds:

... in my heart I feel him to be my inferior--nearer the abysmal amoeba and the Neanderthal man--and at times cannot veil a sort of condescension and sardonic contempt for him, no matter how much my aesthetic and intellectual superior he may be. It is a very deep feeling and because it is a very deep feeling amongst huge blond men of the woods and seas I hold it to be as sacred and authentic as any other human feeling. (SL I.315)

So we are asked to believe that the Nordic barbarians preferred pure and abstemious behaviour also. Then, in the depths of his despair and loneliness in New York, he writes:

I think I have developed an eye for the difference between the clothing a gentleman wears and that which a gentleman doesn't. . . . Certain lapel cuts, textures, and fits tell the story. It amuses me to see how some of these flashy young "boobs" and foreigners spend fortunes on various kinds of expensive clothes which they regard as evidence of meritorious taste, but which in reality are their absolute social and aesthetic

damnation--being little short of placards shrieking in bold letters: "*I am an ignorant peasant*," "*I am a mongrel gutter-rat*," or "*I am a tasteless and unsophisticated yokel*." (SL II.28-29)

This would be amusing were it not that Lovecraft was so serious about it; and he adds, purely as an afterthought, "And yet perhaps these creatures are not, after all, seeking to conform to the absolute artistic standard of gentle-folk!" A later letter to August Derleth exhibits clearly where this sensitivity to dress came from:

I also had my affectations at your age--mainly a sedulous cultivation of premature elderliness and sartorial antiquarianism manifesting itself in stiff bosom shirt, round cuffs, black coat and vest and grey striped trousers, standing collar and black string tie, &c.--with austere and reticent mannerisms and speech to match. Now that is all over with, and I am the plainest of citizens. (SL II.204)

Not plain enough, evidently, to forgive others for failing to conform to his ways.

A final example of this tendency in Lovecraft that I wish to examine is his treatment of homosexuality, especially its embodiment in the figure of Oscar Wilde. As late as 1933 Lovecraft noted that "I always knew that pederasty was a disgusting custom of many ancient nations" (SL IV.234)--the subjective insertion of the pejorative "disgusting" is of interest--while at about the same time he told Derleth:

So far as the case of homosexualism goes, the primary and vital objection against it is that it is naturally (physically and involuntarily--not merely 'morally' or aesthetically) repugnant to the overwhelming bulk of mankind . . .⁸

How Lovecraft arrives at this view is a mystery. But we should therefore not be surprised when Lovecraft, although vastly admiring Wilde as a creative artist, lashes out at him as follows:

As a man, however, Wilde admits of absolutely no defence. His character, notwithstanding a daintiness of manners which imposed an exterior shell of decorative decency and decorum, was as thoroughly rotten and contemptible as it is possible for a human character to be; a fact which is unfortunately established beyond mere rumour by the reluctant testimony of those toward whom he practiced no concealment. So thorough was his absence of that form of taste which we call a moral sense, that his derelictions comprised not only the greater and grosser offences, but all those petty dishonesties, shiftinesses, pusillanimities, and affected contemptibilities and cowardices which mark the mere "cad" or "bounder" as well as the actual "villain". It is an ironic circumstance that he who succeeded for a time in being the Prince of Dandies, was never in any basic sense what one likes to call a *gentleman*.⁹

It is painfully obvious that Lovecraft, while doggedly trying intellectually to maintain his aesthetic basis for ethics ("that form of taste which we call a moral sense"), is so repelled by Wilde's homosexuality that he bends over backwards to condemn him. Curiously, the Catholic Derleth must have expressed reservations on the ferocity of Lovecraft's vilification, forcing Lovecraft to respond with still greater fatuity:

As to W's character--it is probably understood about as little--or as much--as that of any social offender. Of course there is a cause for any departure from a normally adjusted emotional life, but if we fail to blame one we must fail to blame all--or vice versa. In reality both praise and blame are futile, since there are no absolute standards in a meaningless cosmos; but we may at least adopt the empirical standards we inherit, and consider all acts in the light of their harmony or inharmony with the social and biological legacy of our particular race

⁸Lovecraft to August Derleth, 16 February 1933 (ms., State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

⁹Lovecraft to August Derleth, 20 January 1927 (ms., State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

and culture. This has at least the merit of tallying more or less approximately with our natural preferences and prejudices.¹⁰

This goes from bad to worse. Here again Lovecraft is insisting upon a mythical uniformity of ethical sentiment derived from the "social and biological legacy of our particular race and culture"; and the added fallacy for Lovecraft is, again, the fact that he himself had sloughed off so many of the "empirical standards" he had inherited from his upbringing as a near-aristocrat in late Victorian Anglo-American culture. Under his own system of ethics Lovecraft would himself risk being condemned for his irreligiousness, his peculiar literary tastes, his fondness for Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and even Bertrand Russell, and so many other particulars of his thought and conduct. If he were so condemned, Lovecraft would be the first to trumpet the fact that "there are no absolute standards in a meaningless cosmos".

Probably the soundest and most concise enunciation of Lovecraft's ethics is in a letter to Woodburn Harris in 1929:

So far as I am concerned--I am an aesthete devoted to harmony, and to the extraction of the maximum possible pleasure from life. I find by experience that my chief pleasure is in symbolic identification with the landscape and tradition-stream to which I belong--hence I follow the ancient, simple New England ways of living, and observe the principles of honour expected of a descendant of English gentlemen. It is pride and beauty-sense, plus the automatic instincts of generations trained in certain conduct-patterns, which determine my conduct from day to day. But this is *not ethics*, because the same compulsions and preferences apply, with me, to things wholly outside the ethical zone. For example, I never cheat or steal. Also, I never wear a top-hat with a sack coat or munch bananas in public on the streets, because a gentleman does not do those things either. I would as soon do the one as the other sort of thing--it is all a matter of harmony and good taste--whereas the ethical or "righteous" man would be horrified by dishonesty yet tolerant of coarse personal ways. (SL II.288-89)

As early as 1918 Lovecraft had uttered the nucleus of this view:

My morality can be traced to two distinct sources, scientific and aesthetic. My love of truth is outraged by the flagrant disturbance of sociological relations involved in so-called "wrong"; whilst my aesthetic sense is outraged and disgusted with the violations of taste and harmony thereupon attendant. (SL I.64)

What the 1929 letter seeks to do is to justify both the ethical and social conventions Lovecraft had inherited from his upbringing or had adopted intellectually from his reading and general observations. Here the conception avoids the objections we have made to several similar utterances because Lovecraft fully embraces the relativity of values both for his attraction to the past and to points of social conduct (for him an aspect of the same thing); it is simply unfortunate that he did not adopt this level-headed tone more often. It is also clear that Lovecraft, having inherited a set of basically irrational social prejudices from his upbringing and early environment, is now seeking to find intellectual ways of making them sound plausible. Lovecraft had learnt too well, from his reading of philosophy, that such prejudices cannot be legitimately defended, and so he papers them over with pseudo-philosophical or pseudo-aesthetic conceptions like "good taste", "empirical [as opposed to cosmic or absolutist] standards", and the like. When challenged, Lovecraft either relents and admits that his prejudices are simply prejudices or tries even harder to defend them intellectually, floundering pitifully in the process.

I quoted the 1918 letter because it occurs in the context of a discussion of religious ethics, and we ought to give some attention to Lovecraft's critique of it. There seem to be two strains in Lovecraft's remarks:

- 1) Religious ethics (again, for all practical purposes we are concerned with Christianity) is intrinsically overvalued: it does not always lead to good conduct or social harmony.

¹⁰Lovecraft to August Derleth, 25 January 1927 (ms., State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

2) The fact that religious ethics is founded upon a demonstrably false metaphysics renders it empty and valueless.

Let us consider each of these in detail.

1) In his one reference to Christianity, Hugh Elliot writes:

The Church for two thousand years has dominated opinion; and see the result. If humanity ever learnt by experience, they would assuredly hasten to the most extreme form of materialism they could find. For things are not what they seem to be on the surface. Christianity does not lead to an age of universal brotherly love, as we might expect from its doctrines; nor does materialism lead to any of the alarming consequences which its numerous enemies endeavour to anticipate.¹¹

Lovecraft is not especially vociferous on this point, but addresses it now and again:

It is a general objection to Christianity, that it stifled artistic freedom, trampled on healthy instincts, and set up false and unjust standards.¹²

If we are now less pious, we are also less hypocritical. One honest Nietzsche is worth a dozen mock-saints.¹³

The good effects of Christianity are neither to be denied, nor lightly esteemed, although candidly I will admit that I think them overrated. (SL I.65)

Later in his life Lovecraft condemned religion as simply unworkable in modern life:

It is an utter piece of hokum to apply half the dope of some simple-minded, half-epileptic Oriental mystic or prince or fisherman or tent maker of the agricultural, half-nomadic age, to the utterly antipodal life and problems of an increasingly mechanised western world. We forget that, although human nature itself is unchanging, all codes and reaction-formulae governing human beings involve not human nature alone, but human nature in relation to the immediate objective background of facilities and folkways, needs, occupations, previous fund of intellectual ideas and emotional habits, and prevailing customs of mental and emotional discipline. Half of what Buddha or Christus or Mahomet said is either simply idiocy or downright destructiveness, as applied to the western world of the twentieth century; whilst virtually *all* of the emotional-imaginative background of assumptions from which they spoke, is now proved to be sheer childish primitiveness. (SL III.47-48)

Somewhat later Lovecraft recognised that religion can be a strongly reactionary force in times when social and political change is required:

Ordinarily I am not at all hostile to any sort of Santa Claus belief that anyone may wish to harbour, but of late years I feel that formal religions may cause much trouble in the period of social and economic readjustment which lies ahead. All the powerful orthodoxies represent celestial projections of the now obsolescent political order, hence are pledged to defend it against all change. With a mechanised world of radically altered conditions, great changes will certainly be necessary from now on--yet all the official faiths recognise the extant fabric as sacred, and blindly oppose any rational readjustment based on current needs. (SL IV.277-78)

¹¹Modern Science and Materialism (London: Longmans, 1919), p. 16.

¹²In Defence of Dagon, ed. S. T. Joshi (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1985), p. 28.

¹³Ibid., p. 31.

One might have supposed that Lovecraft derived much of his attack on religion from Nietzsche (especially *The Anti-Christ*), but such does not appear to be the case. It is true that Lovecraft parrots Nietzsche's branding of the Judaeo-Christian religion as a 'slave morality';¹⁴ but he does so half-heartedly and without especial emphasis.¹⁵

2) Lovecraft takes much greater interest in this point. The entirety of his 1918 letter really revolves around this issue:

What the honest thinker wishes to know, has nothing to do with complex human conduct. He simply demands a scientific *explanation* of the things he sees. His only animus toward the church concerns its deliberate inculcation of demonstrable untruths in the community. No matter how white a lie may be--no matter how much good it may do--we are always more or less disgusted by its diffusion. (SL I.65)

What Lovecraft fears if ethics and religion are too closely linked is the general collapse of ethical behaviour in society once the falsity of religion is perceived on a widespread basis:

The time is coming when the old formulae will cease to enchant, for nothing can last eternally which is not founded on demonstrable truth. And for that future we must provide while there is time. Without attacking religion in any way, let us admit that virtue and honour are possible outside its charmed circle. Let us cultivate morality as an independent principle. Let us cultivate philanthropy for its own sake. True, religion has hitherto done marvels for these things--but religion will some day perish, and these things must never perish. (SL I.66)

And yet, Lovecraft is willing to admit that a purely materialist ethics will probably not suffice for the majority. Here he was actually on the side of his orthodox friend Maurice W. Moe (albeit for different reasons) against the evangelical atheist James F. Morton. Materialism--the claims of Ernst Haeckel and Hugh Elliot notwithstanding--simply does not provide enough emotional satisfaction to the average person to serve as a guide to conduct or solace against the pains and miseries of existence. But where Elliot suggested only briefly that materialism does not 'lead to any of the alarming consequences which its numerous enemies endeavour to anticipate', Lovecraft elaborates:

Just how much of the possible decadence of this age may be traced to materialism it is impossible to say; at any rate, it cannot be helped. As a matter of fact, the connexion is probably other than causal. Progress and sophistication, arch-enemies of all illusion, have destroyed traditions of behaviour as well as of thought; and acting upon a sensitive and heterogeneous world have culminated in an inevitable bewilderment and realisation of futility. One cause may underlie decadence and materialism, but these two are sisters--not child and parent.¹⁶

It is to be expected that Lovecraft would be merciless in his condemnation of the recrudescence of mysticism or religious belief in light of the uncertainties of modern science, as when he speaks of

the new mysticism or neo-metaphysics bred of the advertised uncertainties of recent science--Einstein, the quantum theory, and the resolution of matter into force. Although these new turns of science don't really mean a thing in relation to the myth of cosmic consciousness and teleology, a new brood of despairing and horrified moderns is seizing on the doubt of all positive knowledge which they imply; and is deducing therefore that, *since nothing is true, therefore anything can be true whence one may invent or revive any sort of mythology that fancy or nostalgia or desperation may dictate, and defy anyone to prove it isn't emotionally true--whatever that means*. This sickly, decadent neo-mysticism--a protest not only against machine materialism but against pure science with its destruction of the mystery and dignity of human

¹⁴Cf. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), pp. 33-34.

¹⁵Cf. *In Defence of Dagon*, p. 28; SL II.293.

¹⁶In *Defence of Dagon*, p. 30.

The Extinction of Mankind in the Prose Poem "Memory"

By Lance Arney

H. P. Lovecraft's philosophy of mechanistic materialism has revealed the absolute insignificance of all human beings: ". . . mankind as a whole has no goal or purpose whatsoever, but is a mere superfluous speck in the unfathomable vortices of infinity and eternity."¹ In one of Lovecraft's letters the "insignificant bacteria called human beings"² are referred to simply as "creatures of the moment".³ He even predicts that "in a few million years there will be no human race at all".⁴ But perhaps the idea is best expressed in the following passage:

No one outside this microscopic earth knows or will ever know that the human race exists. When the breed is extinct, there will be none (unless some other terrestrial species arises to consciousness) to recall that it ever existed. And when this planet is finally frozen to lifelessness by the fading of the sun, there will certainly be not a conceivable grain of evidence left to tell anybody (assuming the existence of other organisms somewhere amidst the scattered galaxies) that any life has ever existed on it.⁵

While many critics have observed how this concept became one of the central themes of the later mythos fiction, most have overlooked a much earlier example. In the prose poem "Memory", Lovecraft deals not only with the insignificance of mankind, but with the actual *extinction* of the species as well. His techniques in so doing will be explored in the present essay.

The events of the story occur in the future, after man has become extinct; yet we do not learn that it is *man* who no longer exists until we read the penultimate sentence of the tale. The first paragraph informs us of the only remaining essence of humanity, its stone structures and buildings: ". . . evil vines and creeping plants crawl amidst the stones of ruined palaces, twining tightly about broken columns and strange monoliths, and heaving up marble pavements laid by forgotten hands."⁶ "Crumbling courtyards", "deep treasure-vaults", and vast stones which fell from mighty walls are also written of as reliques from the past. And yet the fallen stones still serve a rather amusing purpose—a purpose not originally intended by the builders: ". . . beneath them the grey toad makes his habitation." It is significant that "deep treasure-vaults" are mentioned as surviving, suggesting that they were built with such care and cunning that they became more endurable than the whole race of man itself. Perhaps Lovecraft thought that most people waste too much time saving and preserving money when they should be more concerned with saving and

¹H. P. Lovecraft to Rheinhart Kleiner, 14 September 1919 (SL I.86).

²Ibid. (SL I.87).

³H. P. Lovecraft to the Kleicomolo, 8 August 1916 (SL I.24).

⁴H. P. Lovecraft to Rheinhart Kleiner, 23 February 1918 (SL I.56).

⁵H. P. Lovecraft to Robert E. Howard, 3-5-7 October 1932 (SL IV.82).

⁶H. P. Lovecraft, "Memory", *Four Prose Poems* (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1987), p. [5]. All subsequent citations of this story are taken from p. [5] of this booklet.

preserving their culture. Possibly of the greatest importance, though, as S. T. Joshi has indicated to me, is the fact that Lovecraft makes no mention of *modern* reliques like skyscrapers. All the remains seem to be remains of *ancient* civilisations-- . . . this [could] mean that Lovecraft thinks that modern civilisation is even more ephemeral than mankind generally, and that it will not leave *any* trace behind at all.⁷ This is tenable and is supported, in part, by Lovecraft's statement that "a kind of dark age will come in 300 to 1000 years. . . . Nor will it be without its compensations, as hinted by Dunsany in his *Prayer of the Flowers* in *Fifty-One Tales*.⁸ A dark age would effectively end modern civilization, rendering it "more ephemeral than mankind generally", given Lovecraft's time limit of another 300 to 1000 years. It is interesting that Lovecraft should make an allusion to Lord Dunsany's "The Prayer of the Flowers". In this story the narrator relates how he heard one night the voice of the flowers on the wind praying to Pan that something be done about the clamor and pollution of the cities that were encroaching on the neighboring fields and woods. After this the narrator hears the voice of Pan on the wind, answering the plea of the flowers: "Be patient a little, these things are not for long."⁹ "The Prayer of the Flowers", then, appears to be thematically similar to Lovecraft's "Memory", although it is doubtful if Dunsany's piece could have influenced Lovecraft's--Lovecraft probably had not read Dunsany before writing "Memory".

Nevertheless, through the conversation of the Genie and the Daemon of the Valley, we learn about the deeds, aspect, and name of the creatures who built "these things of stone". There deeds "were but of the moment"; in appearance they resembled "the little apes in the trees"; and as to their name, "these beings of yesterday were called Man."

So then, what is the meaning of this brief story? One interpretation is that its very briefness is symbolic of the transience of mankind. Or we may simply accept what is intimated in the story itself: man is just another temporary animal no less subject to extinction than any other type of animal. There is nothing "immortal" about *Homo sapiens*. We may some day perish just as the dinosaurs have. We know that our species--as well as all life on this planet--cannot survive the death of the sun, for it is what has made our existence possible in the first place. Further, there will be no 'second coming of Christ' to save mankind, as most of this God-fearing nation believes. If anything is evident, it is that most humans cannot accept the fact that they are mortals without meaning. As a result, they feel compelled to practice a religion which promises them salvation and everlasting life. But there is a great difference between faith and fact. And the fact is that at some time in the remote future--provided that "some other terrestrial species arises to consciousness" to make even this possible--mankind will be, as this prose poem and its title imply, nothing more than *a memory*.

⁷S. T. Joshi to Lance Arney, 26 January 1990.

⁸H. P. Lovecraft to Fritz Leiber, 18 November 1936 (SL V.358).

⁹Lord Dunsany, "The Prayer of the Flowers", *Fifty-One Tales* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915), p. 37.

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emotion and experience--will be the dominant creed of middle twentieth century aesthetes, as the Eliot and Huxley penumbra well prognosticate. (SL III.53)

To this very little need be added, even if Lovecraft's addendum--"As for me--I won't indulge in silly metaphysical 'let's-pretend-ism', but I'll take tradition at face value as a purely emotional bulwark" (SL III.53)--may not be quite as different as the view he has so roundly condemned.

On Lovecraft's "Nemesis"

By Donald R. Burleson

H. P. Lovecraft's early but powerful "Nemesis" (Arkham House: *Collected Poems*, 83-86), by any prosodic standard arguably one of his best poems, offers us the brooding utterances of a sort of dream-presence, a persona appearing to be an undying embodiment of the collective unconscious, or a timeless dreamer who seems doomed to eternal memory by some primordial sin of the spirit. The poem, unendingly interpretable, presents a variety of problems, not the least of which is the question of who or what its persona, its "I", may be: a single memory-haunted dreamer?—a figure seemingly singular but really synecdochically representative of us all?—the text itself, dwelling self-referentially upon its own linguistic machinations?—the reader, whose critical perusal the text anticipates? There can be, of course, no final or single-minded settlement of such questions; but we may nevertheless take a close look at "Nemesis" to see something of the nature of its difficulties. As can scarcely be surprising, it will be seen that, like any richly figural literary text, the poem presents a wealth of indeterminacy and piquant self-subversion denying the possibility of settled reading.

The work opens (and, cyclically, closes): "Through the ghoul-guarded gateways of slumber,/Past the wan-mooned abysses of night,/I have lived o'er my lives without number,/I have sounded all things with my sight;/And I struggle and shriek ere the daybreak, bring driven to madness with fright." Right away, aside from the ongoing and unsolvable problem of identity of the persona, one is struck with the poem's metaphors, which posit a number of problematical notions, e.g., the confounding of time with space. Night, for the persona, is characterised not by qualities of time but by "abysses", spacial lacunae that seem to stand agape in the dreamer's world. Slumber, no mere temporal condition of the mind, has spacially suggestive "gateways" that are "ghoul-guarded"—one wonders: to keep someone out, or to keep someone or something in? Gateways, in any case, are of course as bidirectional as the double faces of Janus (appropriately, for an opening stanza that is also a closing stanza), in that they are both ways in and ways out, and (more paradoxically) are both conduits of passage and blockages of passage. It is intriguing that the poem's persona speaks of being *past* (rather than *in* or *into*) "the wan-mooned abysses of night"—*past* night, into what further region or condition? The suggestion is one of open-ended and indeterminate horror; yet the text subverts this very suggestion, in having the persona exclaim, "I have lived o'er my lives without number" and "I have sounded all things with my sight"—oddly totalising claims that appear to place the persona in the position of having, already, experienced all there is to experience, without further possibilities; this suggestion finds iteration in the text's continuing use of the present perfect tense, in an anaphoric series that we will have occasion here to examine.

Yet again, in the end, the text subverts this very subversion by suggesting that the persona's curse of memory and perception has not ended and will never do so: "Nor can respite be found in the tomb;/Down the infinite aeons come beating the wings of unmerciful gloom." Here again we find spatial and temporal imagery confounded, with stretches of time spoken of as if they were corridors in space. In a conflation of time and space, a persona extended in time may be extended in space as well, and thus multiple; we shall further examine this question of non-self-identity.

Subsequent to the opening stanza, the text offers the device of anaphora to keep the pace moving, in its repetition (in the first lines of the successive stanzas) of the phrase "I have" with the past participles of various verbs:

"I have whirled", "I have drifted", "I have plunged", "I have stumbled", "I have scanned", "I have peered", "I have haunted". The superficial effect is to grant continuance of identity to the persona, suggesting a single, weakly haunted, long-enduring "I" who has done all these things in the caverns (or time-gulfs) of dream. Yet the very nature of the sequence is such that the text subverts this notion of continuous self-identity; the very fact that the "I" is repeated through a sequence of contexts is a textual postulation of change, of shifting, of non-self-identity: for to repeat is to change--to repeat a signifier is to embed it in new contexts, and thus to change it, since the signifier is "defined", as it were, only by its contexts, which shift. The "I" changes by reappearance; otherwise, a subsequent occurrence would be merely the initial occurrence. There is no single "I", but rather a flux-driven spectrum of "I's, no one of which has any privileged existence without reference to all the others with which it contrasts itself. (*Nemesis* derives from the same Indo-European root *nem-* that is responsible for *nomad*; the poem's "I" is not so much a fixed individual as a wandering legion of beings.) The text postures between claims of fixity of identity on the one hand, and, on the other, claims of the unthinkable of such fixity. Yet each pole of this opposition turns out to be the enabling condition of the other. It is impossible to reflect on the refusal of the persona to be a monadic, fixed entity without considering that, by one way of looking at the text, it *might* have been so; one cannot meaningfully contemplate the notion that something apparently singular is not really so, without thinking that it *was*, after all, apparently singular. Conversely, it is meaningless to dwell upon the supposedly unchanging character of the persona without reflecting that "unchanging" ineluctably puts one in mind of *change* at the outset. As so often happens in literary texts, the poles of the binary opposition collapse together against any ideological or categorical species of wishful thinking that they might have remained apart.

But the anaphora of the stanzas' opening lines presents further complexities. One notices that the verbs thus employed reveal a continuous narrowing of imagery and action. In "I have whirled with the earth at the dawning", *whirled* suggests an action that must be, like the primordial motions of newly formed planets, protracted over countless aeons and over immeasurable stretches of space. In "I have drifted o'er seas without ending", *drifted*, contextually describing a drifting over seas, is likewise suggestive of a protracted motion, though on a lesser scale than *whirled*. In "I have plunged like a deer through the arches", *plunged* creates imagery of somewhat protracted but this time more limited motion, motion directed toward a spacial destination or (at least) a place of stopping. In "I have stumbled by cave-riddled mountains", *stumbled* portrays a yet more limited motion, and a slower one, an earthbound motion rather than a motion of the air. In "I have scanned the vast ivy-clad palace", *scanned* has reduced the motion to a movement of the eyes only, while in "I have peered from the casements in wonder", *peered* describes activity in which even the eyes do not need to move. And in "I have haunted the tombs of the ages", *haunted* suggests an activity which, far from containing any necessary motion, does not even presuppose (in contrast with eyes that peer) any physical presence, in that one pictures, for a "presence" that haunts, a ghostly entity at most, a mere consciousness without substance. The imagery steadily narrows in scope of action. Yet the text, in the process of presenting this imagery, interrupts itself with displacements of direction, displacements given by lines within the stanzas. Between *whirled* and *drifted*, we have "I have seen the dark universe yawning", where *seen* is a verb more sequentially belonging in the vicinity of the later *scanned* and *peered*. Similarly, between *scanned* and *peered* we find "I have trod its untenanted hall", with *trod* describing an action more sequentially suitable to a placement in the vicinity of the earlier *plunged* and *stumbled*. The text disturbs its own continuity, as if to say that any too facile a reading, any too hopeful a view of settled structure, is simplistic.

Even if one regards the narrowing of action-imagery as reasonably stable structure, the text presents further problems with it, in that the narrowing that takes place is a narrowing in the realms of *dream*: realms eternal, realms archetypal and cosmic, realms redolent not of narrowness but of unbounded breadth. The text has thus insisted upon collapsing yet another binary opposition: the bipolarity of narrowness versus breadth. The sequencing of verbs, though self-disturbed, describes a narrowing that takes place in a field of infinite breadth; and, conversely, the very range of effect in these verbs (from planetary whirling down to peering and haunting) suggests a breadth in the process of narrowing, a broad and extensive amount of narrowing. Indwelling (as a matter of textual necessity) with each pole of the opposition as its enabling condition, is a trace of the other, supposedly contrasted, pole--if the text's broad dream-realms did not contain narrowing, the text would have no focus, and if the process of narrowing were not broad in extent, the text would have no scope. One sees here an example of how literary texts not only do subvert their own structures, but *must* do so.

We return to the problem of who, or what, the persona is. If one momentarily takes the "I" of the poem to be the text itself, or to be the textually anticipated critical reader (an effect brought about simply by reading the poem aloud oneself), one finds high irony in the strange claim "I have sounded all things with my sight", since the very energies of the poem are spent in describing (and textually demonstrating) the impossibility of "sounding all things", or nailing down all interpretative possibilities, or getting, ever, to the bottom of things. It is even possible that the text (allegorising its own self-oppositions) speaks in an assortment of contending or competing voices. Where we have "I have lived o'er my lives without number" and "I have sounded all things with my sight"--a voice denying the possibility of further or new developments--the text follows with "And I struggle and shriek ere the daybreak, being driven to madness with fright": as if to say, "And on the other hand I (unlike you who have just spoken) still anticipate further struggles." Perhaps it is then the experience-exhausted "I" who returns with his "I have whirled", "I have drifted", etc. Yet as we have seen, this "I", scarcely a singular presence, breaks down into a medley of (non-)identities. Even if one rather reductively regards the poem's "I" as a memory-haunted dreamer (or as metonymy for ourselves, a race of dreamers), one encounters all the difficulties of non-self-identity through textual iteration as already described.

No matter who or what the "I" may be, or whether the poem is or is not (and we know that it both is *and* is not) an anticipatory allegory of its own reading, the supposedly present structures of the text work hard both at appearing to be stable and at subverting such appearances. In closing with the "same" stanza as that with which it opens--though the closing stanza only *appears* to be the same: it is really different both by virtue of being repeated, and by virtue of the experience of reading by the time one reaches the end--the text suggests both closure and cyclicity, both a folding-in and a cosmic unfolding-out. (One notes that the verbal narrowing that occurs in the poem leads immediately, paradoxically, to a broadening out into boundless concerns: "Down infinite aeons. . . .") Like its own "gateways", the poem allows no settled thinking on matters of interiority and exteriority. If we are the persona, then we are both in and out--outside of normal experience yet inside what is normal experience for the dreamer, inside the caverns of dream yet "past" them, outside any possibility of final understanding yet inside the problem of searching for it.

We may well be the persona, but the only sin of the spirit we could commit here that would call for the retributive justice of the goddess Nemesis would be the sin of pride--a prideful notion that we had ever really, totally, finally, read "Nemesis" or gotten at its "meaning" or "truth". If there is any truth, it is that reading "Nemesis" will lead us "[d]own infinite aeons" and corridors of language in which indeed we will see "the dark universe yawning", and in which we will find interpretative "abysses" where readings yet unborn will, like the "black planets" of the text, "roll in their horror unheeded, without knowledge or lustre or name". That is, without privilege-granting "heeding", without any possible claim to final knowledge, without the specious "lustre" of any imagined mastery over interpretation, and without even the apparent fixity of names. In this respect, the text allegorises the readings it provokes in its own bottomless pits of night.

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... the Lloigor, although infinitely more powerful than men, were also aware that optimism would be absurd in this universe. Their minds were a unity, not compartmentalised, like ours. There was no distinction in them between conscious, subconscious, and superconscious mind. So they saw things clearly all the time, without the possibility of averting the mind from the truth, or forgetting. . . . The Lloigor *lived* their pessimism.

On the whole, it is difficult to know what to make of this volume and of the whole phenomenon of Cthulhu Mythos imitations. The fact that the latest stories in this book date only from the late 1970s may mean that Turner could not find any worthy Mythos tales written in the last decade (or did not bother to look, something that is entirely understandable). One can sense in his introduction--although clearly it would not have been politic for him to have said so openly--that he has little patience with the whole "Cthulhu & Co." industry that still manages to keep the fan press stocked with new Shudde-M'ells and *Cthaat Aquadengens*; and when he says that a "very real injustice" has been done to the Mythos by all these half-baked imitations by talentless hacks, he is alluding to the spattering of this filthy slime upon Lovecraft's own work and reputation. Again the question is raised: Why bother to write this stuff? Original and skilful writers do not write pastiche; unoriginal and unskilled writers should simply shut up. But this is not likely to happen so long as fans and fan publishers continue to think that Lovecraft is about bugs and frogs and not about people.

Review

H. P. LOVECRAFT & DIVERS HANDS. *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos.* [Revised edition edited by James Turner.] With Illustrations by Jeffrey K. Potter. Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1990. xiv, 529 pp. \$23.95 hc.

Reviewed by S. T. Joshi.

This book is labelled a "Golden Anniversary Anthology" commemorating fifty years of Arkham House, and constitutes a revision and expansion of the celebrated volume edited by August Derleth in 1969. Fifty years of Arkham House are indeed worth celebrating, although, unlike Derleth, the current editor James Turner does so in an almost excessively self-effacing manner: he fails to list himself as editor of this book (or even as co-editor with Derleth), and, instead of such crudely self-promoting ventures as *Thirty Years of Arkham House*, has contented himself with issuing a catalogue slightly more elaborate than usual and writing a reserved statement about Arkham House on the inside back flap of this book. He has also supplied an introduction, but more on this later.

I am not sure how many readers are aware of the surprising number of complicated critical issues this single book raises. I am not alluding to the reshuffling of the contents of the older anthology (four stories dropped and seven added); I am referring to the whole phenomenon of pastiche and in particular the way in which Lovecraft's "Cthulhu Mythos" has been imitated. The fundamental question is: Why? Why would any writer want to do this sort of thing? Surely it is clear that only those writers who have nothing of their own to say would stoop to pastiche, since by definition pastiche means the suppression of whatever individuality one might have and the duplication--within fairly narrow and specific parameters--of the model's tone, style, and substance. If a story contains too much originality, it stops being pastiche and becomes something else--it is no longer a "Lovecraft pastiche" but is somehow nebulously "Lovecraft-influenced". And this raises a further critical problem: What, exactly, are the criteria to be used in evaluating such stories? They are evidently not to be regarded on their intrinsic merits, but rather on the fidelity with which they recall the originals on which they are based; but what virtue can we find in a work that copies someone else's vision? Just as literary criticism used to be conceived as a sort of second-order product, dependent upon the literature it was discussing (a view to which, incredibly, I still incline, even though it is completely antiquated and is derided by those critics who assert, by gum, that they're writing *literature* and don't you forget it), so pastiche must be regarded as a second-order phenomenon, one that can never rise to the status of the model it strives to emulate.

Let me at last cease speaking in generalities. My first response on reading this book is a sort of overriding pity for certain writers who have wasted a large portion of their careers imitating something they have not understood. Some of the early stories in this book (those by Frank Belknap Long, Clark Ashton Smith, and August Derleth) make one painfully aware that some of these writers did not even know the rudiments of competent story-writing. These are the stories of adolescents (actual or arrested) written for other adolescents. They are now simply embarrassing. Let us consider a passage from Smith's "The Return of the Sorcerer": "Horror-breeding hints and noisome intuitions invaded my brain. More and more the atmosphere of that house enveloped and stifled me with poisonous, miasmal mystery; and I felt everywhere the invisible brooding of malignant incubi." No doubt Smith patted himself on the back for having successfully imitated Lovecraft's richly textured prose, but it is all bombast and fustian; it literally means nothing because it does not arise naturally from the story in which it is embedded. A passage from Derleth's "Beyond the Threshold" gets to the heart of the issue: "there were words--but not words I had ever heard before: a kind of horrible, primeval mouthing, as if some bestial creature with but half a tongue ululated syllables of meaningless horror." I am inclined to deconstruct this, since it is very easy to derive from this passage a meaning entirely opposite to what Derleth intended.

James Turner in his introduction says it all, although he is tactful enough not to single out any individuals: "The Mythos is not a concatenation of facile formulas and glossary gleanings, but rather a certain cosmic state of mind." David E. Schultz puts it another way: Lovecraft does not write about monsters, he writes about people--people who come face to face with their own appalling insignificance in a universe that has no awareness of their existence. This is a theme worth writing about; giant bugs and frogs are not.

Robert Bloch finally starts us in a somewhat better direction in "The Shadow from the Steeple" (1950), which shows a genuine extension of Lovecraft's way of thinking: the notion that Nyarlathotep is a sort of symbol for chaos and scientific *hybris* in impelling scientists to discover greater and greater engines of destruction is powerful, although the execution is rather awkward (I would not be so foolish as to try to shoot Nyarlathotep with a revolver). Bloch's "Notebook Found in a Deserted House" (1951) is a still greater success, not in conception but in style: the transposition of Lovecraft's cosmicism into the crude patois of an ignorant country youth is a masterstroke.

Indeed, the halfway point in this book (beginning with Fritz Leiber's "The Terror from the Depths" and continuing with stories by Ramsey Campbell, Colin Wilson, Joanna Russ, Karl Edward Wagner, Philip José Farmer, and Richard A. Lupoff) marks the transition from fiction intended essentially for children and fiction written by and for adults. It can hardly be denied that these latter writers are vastly superior in technique and sophistication to their predecessors. We do have, however, a relapse into juvenility in Brian Lumley's "Rising with Surtsey". Lumley's two stories in the original anthology, "The Sister City" and "Cement Surroundings", are some of the most spectacularly awful stories ever written, and would have trouble finding their way even into such things as *Chronicles of the Cthulhu Codex or Revelations from Yuggoth*; indeed, "The Sister City" has the merit of being positively the worst story by a professional writer I have ever read. But old Augie couldn't resist the stuff. "Rising with Surtsey" comes from *Dark Things* (1971), and is marginally better, although being nothing but a cheap rip-off of "The Call of Cthulhu" and "The Shadow out of Time". (I was sorry, incidentally, to note the omission of my friend J. Vernon Shea's "The Haunter of the Graveyard" from the original anthology; it is not much of a story, but hardly worse than some others that were retained. Shea's best Mythos story, of course, is "Dead Giveaway" [1976], even though it has appeared only in the fan press. And I think Turner made a mistake in omitting James Wade's substantial story "The Deep Ones", a skilfully written tale with a delicacy of character portrayal that Lovecraft could not have matched.)

All this raises another troubling issue: not only are most of these stories dependent upon Lovecraft's vision, but many of them do little more than rewrite some of Lovecraft's own tales. Derleth was the most notorious example of this tendency, especially in his contemptible "posthumous collaborations". But I find that Leiber's "The Terror from the Depths", elegant and polished as it is, is not much more than a retelling of (presented in the form of a pseudo-sequel to) "The Whisperer in Darkness". Other stories show no especial advancement upon Lovecraft's conceptions. Stephen King's "Jerusalem's Lot" talks much of *De Vermis Mysteriis*, but is in the end simply a clever story about a big worm. On the other hand, Ramsey Campbell's "Cold Print" makes us ask how we are to regard this as a Mythos story at all. To be sure, it is a vintage example of Campbell's first-person-paranoid style, but the mere inclusion of an occult title, *The Revelations of Glaaki*, does not (*pace* Lin Carter) a Mythos story make. Campbell's superb tale had no business being in the original volume, and has no business being here.

Another curious phenomenon we can trace from the beginning to the end of this book--and, hence, from the beginning of Lovecraft's Mythos to the present day--is the unusual degree to which *Lovecraft himself* enters into these works. This is a more unusual phenomenon that it may appear: to my knowledge, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle does not himself figure in very many Sherlock Holmes imitations. It is, I suppose, a tribute to the vigour of Lovecraft's personality, and the near-legendary status he acquired even before his death. On the one hand we have Long's "The Space-Eaters" and Bloch's "The Shambler from the Stars", where characters thinly disguised as Lovecraft appear; then we have stories by Derleth, Bloch, Wilson, and others, where Lovecraft himself is named. This procedure is a little problematical, because it makes Lovecraft a believer and even an authority in the "myths" he was perpetrating. Bloch's "The Shadow from the Steeple" unwittingly echoes the claims of recent occultists when it says of Lovecraft: "For he wrote in parable and allegory, but he wrote the truth." Derleth (again) carries this device to shameless lengths: in "The Dweller in Darkness" he actually refers to "The Outsider and Others", by H. P. Lovecraft, published by Arkham House last year!

There can hardly be a doubt that Wilson's "The Return of the Lloigor" and Karl Edward Wagner's "Sticks" are the two most successful stories in this book. Wilson's long story hits home not merely because it brilliantly transports Lovecraft's vision into the contemporary world, but because it represents a fusion of both *Lovecraft's* and *Wilson's* world-views. In making his creatures, the Lloigor, "deeply and wholly pessimistic", Wilson has created a premise that is keenly frightening to him (since, as he admits in the preface to *The Philosopher's Stone*, he is "rather cheerful by temperament") and so to us:



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Donald R. Burleson's *H. P. Lovecraft: A Post-Structuralist View* has been accepted by the University Press of Kentucky. The volume should appear by fall 1990, although, unfortunately, probably not in time for the centennial conference in August. S. T. Joshi's *H. P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* (Starmont House) is also scheduled to appear in late 1990, but it too will probably miss the conference, as also will *An Epicure in the Terrible*, a collection of essays commemorating Lovecraft's centennial assembled by David E. Schultz and S. T. Joshi, to be published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

A token of Lovecraft's continuing influence is a story in Joanna Russ's collection, *The Hidden Side of the Moon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), entitled "I Had Vacantly Crumpled It into My Pocket . . . But by God, Eliot, *It Was a Photograph from Life!*" (pp. 53-63). The story concerns a somewhat neurotic young man who maintains that "Howard Phillips Lovecraft was the greatest writer in the world". Russ had earlier expressed her interest in Lovecraft in the brief article, "On the Fascination of Horror Stories, Including Lovecraft's", *Science-Fiction Studies* 7, No. 3 (November 1980) 350-52.

Kenneth W. Faig's Moshassuck Press continues to do outstanding work in making available rare and obscure material by and about Lovecraft and his colleagues. *Howard Phillips Lovecraft and Nils Helmer Frome* (1989; \$20), edited by Sam Moskowitz, is a 166-page booklet containing a wealth of material about this Canadian fan writer and editor who knew Lovecraft as a youth; included are such things as Moskowitz's biography of Frome (from *Science-Fiction Studies*), articles and tales by Frome, a transcript of Lovecraft's letters to Frome, and the complete run of Frome's mimeographed fanzine, *Supramundane Stories*, reprinted in facsimile (now somewhat difficult to read, unfortunately). No less interesting is *To Yith and Beyond* by Duane W. Rimel (1990; \$15), a 110-page booklet containing autobiographical accounts by Rimel, his professionally published stories ("The Disinterment", "The Metal Chamber", "The City under the Sea", and "Jungle Princess") reprinted in facsimile from the pulp magazines in which they appeared, and other stories, articles, and poetry by Rimel, concluding with facsimiles of Rimel's sonnet cycle *Dreams of Yith* as published in *The Fantasy Fan* and *The Acolyte*. Humble in appearance and production as these publications are, they contain material that cannot easily be found elsewhere. Order from Kenneth W. Faig, Jr., 2311 Swainwood Drive, Glenview, IL 60025.

Wheeler Winston Dixon, professor of English at the University of Nebraska, has written an interesting article, "H. P. Lovecraft: A Critical Reevaluation", in *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 34 (1988): 102-9, a brief overview of the history of Lovecraft criticism in which S. T. Joshi's critical anthology, *H. P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism* (1980), is cited frequently. Dixon concludes by stating: "Lovecraft is a minor writer, but a major talent in his narrowly defined area. This does not diminish his considerable talents, but placed in context with his contemporaries--Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Stein, or even Sinclair Lewis--Lovecraft is clearly the smaller voice. Yet that voice is original and unique." The periodical can be ordered for \$8.00 (checks payable to West Virginia University Foundation) from the Department of Foreign Languages, Chitwood Hall, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26505.

Lettres d'Innsmouth, the first volume of the *Cahier d'Etudes Lovecraftiennes*, has been published by Encrage (Amiens, 1989). Consisting of translations of the Necronomicon Press volumes *Uncollected Letters* (1986), *In Defence of Dagon* (1985), and Sonia H. Davis' *The Private Life of H. P. Lovecraft* (1985), the book is assembled by Jacques Altairac, and is in essence a sort of special issue of Altairac's *Etudes Lovecraftiennes*. S. T. Joshi's introductions and notes have been translated, and Altairac has added some notes of his own. At the rear of the volume is an original essay by Christian Bonnefous, "Entre ciel et terre", probing Lovecraft's relations with Nietzsche. Altairac now plans to issue a French translation of S. T. Joshi's Starmont Reader's Guide to Lovecraft, along with several other essays by Joshi, as the second volume of the *Cahiers d'Etudes Lovecraftiennes*.

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